

COMMERCIALISM, CAPITALISM, AND CELEBRATION

JACK SANTINO

Traditional holidays in the United States have become remarkable for the amount of commercial activity (Christmas, Halloween). When it is recognized that rituals, festivals, and celebrations are often dramatic symbolic enactments of the culture that produced them, one realizes that it is inevitable that such a class of events would exist. Often the commercialization of holidays starts with the recognition of traditional customs and activities customs are recognized as potentially profitable and exploitable by various industrial interests, and are commercialized as a result. Another, somewhat different, process involves the attempt to translate a custom or a practice associated with a particular holiday to a different festival. The third process focuses on the translations of festive year into mass media (music, film, literature) where one obvious dynamic in the commercialization of a holiday is the fit between the holiday and the genre in question. What is ultimately most interesting is how people actually use the mass media and commercial goods. People continue to adapt their customs and traditions and create new ones; they use the products of mass culture to create meaning within the contexts of their own priorities and their own lives. Celebrations require personal interaction, and it is within the realm of interpersonal communication that real social bonds are created and maintained.

Keywords: traditional holidays, celebrations, Christmas, Halloween; commercialization; USA.

Tradicionalni prazniki v ZDA so izjemni po vseobsežni komercializaciji (najbolj božič, nato noč čarovnic). Ker so rituali, festivali in praznovanja pogosto dramatične simbolične uprizoritve kulture, katere produkt so, je neogibno, da so tudi del porabniške kulture. Avtor komercializacijo opazuje na več na več ravneh: pogosto se začne z ugotovitvijo, da so tradicionalne šege in aktivnosti vnovčljive: komercializaciji je podvržen ves kontekst enega samega praznika (industrija poskrbi za vso tradicionalno praznično opravilo); nekoliko drugačen proces je poskus prenosa značilnosti enega praznika na druge; tretji pa je prevajane prazničnega leta v množične medije (literatura, glasba, film), pri čemer dinamika komercializacije temelji na ujemanju praznika in žanra. Najzanimivejše pa je, kako ljudje uporabljajo medije in komercialne produkte. Prilagajajo si šege in izročila in ustvarjajo nova, uporabljajo množične produkte, da si osmišljajo svoje želje in življenje. Praznovanje ni brez osebnih stikov in prave socialne vezi se ustvarjajo in vzdržujejo le z medčloveškimi stiki in komunikacijo.

Ključne besede: prazniki, praznovanja, božič, noč čarovnic; komercializacija; ZDA.

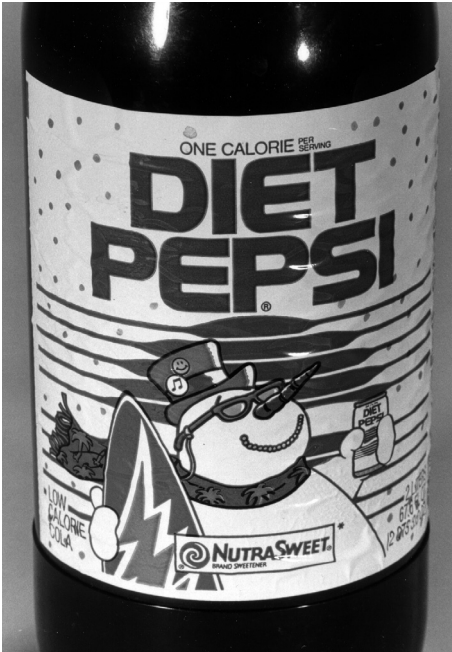
Traditional holidays in the United States have become remarkable for the amount of commercial activity that surrounds them. Christmas, 25 December, is by far the most commercially developed holiday in the U.S., but Halloween (31 October) has become a strong second, with other traditional occasions such as Saint Patrick's Day (17 March) marketed as a drinking occasion, especially for college-age people. In the 20th century, greeting card companies, candy manufacturers, and florists seized on newly established special days such as Mother's Day (the second Sunday in May) or even created new "holidays" whole cloth, such as Boss's Day, Administrative Assistant's (formerly Secretaries') Day, and Grandparents' Day. Holidays in the United States form a nationalized calendar that reflects in part

earlier calendars and the variety of peoples that have settled North America. These national celebrations coexist with numerous local, regional, ethnic, occupational, religious, and family celebrations, which remain more or less outside the orbit of the national capitalistic, consumerist culture.

The fact that the United State is a capitalist country is fundamental. When it is recognized that rituals, festivals, and celebrations are often dramatic symbolic enactments of the culture that produced them, one realizes that it is inevitable that such a class of events would exist. These festivals of consumerism take their place alongside civic and church celebrations, all of which can be seen as official celebrations and exist in uneasy tension with more inversive celebrations or elements of celebration that arise from popular cultural or folk activities. Here I use the term “popular culture” in the sense of large-scale activities generated by and engaged in by people that by and large do not control the flows of power in society. I am not using the term to refer to the mass media, as is sometimes done. In my usage, popular culture and folklore are largely identical, although some may prefer to limit the term “folk” to more self-evidently or apparently more traditional societies.

Often the commercialization of holidays starts with the recognition of traditional customs and activities. The fruit and nuts that once were given to reward doorstep performances have been replaced by commercially produced packaged sweets. Electric lights have replaced real candles, and department store commodities have long since replaced homemade gifts [cf. Waits 1993]. More recently, in the United States, industry has been quick to capitalize on a number of emergent ritualesque and festive traditions. For instance, as Halloween has grown in popularity, so has the concomitant practice of elaborately decorating the front yards and facades of homes. These assemblages of traditional symbolic objects very often include scarecrow-like dummies made of old clothes stuffed with rags and straw. As these have proliferated, mass-produced versions have begun to appear for sale in stores. Likewise, it has become relatively common in the U.S. to announce rites of passage by decorating the facades of houses with balloons, flowers, wreaths, and especially large signs that may announce a retirement, a significant birthday, or the arrival of a new baby. Again, such signs are now available for purchase. In these cases, the customs originate with the people themselves, are recognized as potentially profitable and exploitable by various industrial interests, and are commercialized as a result.

Another, somewhat different, process involves the attempt to translate a custom or a practice associated with a particular holiday to a different festival. For instance, Christmas in the U.S. is a festival of lights. Electric lights not only adorn the Christmas tree indoors. Electric lights are found outside on bushes, trees, mailbox posts, and so on. In the past several years, however, electric Halloween lights have become reasonably common. These are identical to the Christmas lights, except they are color-coded differently. Orange and black, the colors associated with Halloween in the U.S., are used rather than the red and green of Christmas. Similarly, decorative lights are now available for other festive occasions throughout the year.



Figures 1, 2, 3: The festive year on packages – Christmas and New Year.

In the American Southwest, the custom of lighting luminarias – candles anchored in sand, which illuminate brown paper bags along walkways – is a common Latino Christmas custom. Today, luminarias are available nationwide for Christmas (red bags) and Halloween (orange bags.) This represents an attempt to turn a locally regional and ethnic custom into a national one. Americans routinely decry the ever-increasing commercialism of holiday celebrations, but in fact seem to be trapped: the ethos of convenience and consumerism has made many people unable to escape the economic aspects of celebration by accepting them as inevitable, insurmountable realities. Interestingly, the interpersonal activities customarily associated with holidays are what are remembered over the years; the objects that are most revered are those that are handmade or associated with a particular personal relationship.



Figures 4, 5, 6: The festive year on packages – Halloween.

For instance, gift exchange is a major feature of Christmas and the year-end celebrations, traceable (at least) to ancient Rome’s Saturnalia and New Year’s traditions. As celebrated today, Christmas cards and gifts are exchanged (in some counties, St. Nicholas’ Day, New Year’s, or Three Kings’ Day share this gift exchange custom). The amount of money spent on gifts is enormous.

Many businesses in the United States rely entirely on year-end profits to stay afloat. Thus, the economic importance of Christmas is self-evident. However, the items that are saved, that take on personal meaning, are those made by children and given to parents, or made in school and given to relatives and friends. These are saved and are brought out year after year. Homemade tree decorations, or that special ornament the child bought at age ten that she thought was the most beautiful thing in the world to give to a sick parent – these types of objects hold memories. To display them on the tree or around the house is

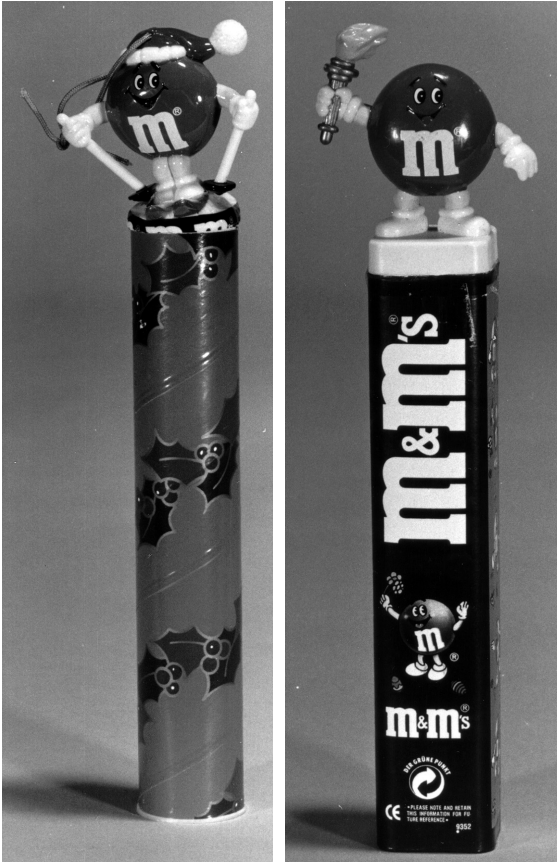
to provoke family stories and to put family history on display. For some, a Christmas tree is like a family album.

Similarly, in my studies of the American Halloween celebration, people have often told me that they consider Halloween a holiday that has yet to be spoiled by commercialism [Santino 1994]. This is perplexing, because Halloween is expanding rapidly as an event that adults actively participate in, along with children. As this has occurred, Halloween has become second only to Christmas in terms of commercial sales. The sale of lights for outdoor display, lawn ornaments in the shape of Halloween monsters, gravestones, and monsters, costumes, and candy, among many other items, add up to a major portion of the annual profits of many industries.

My feeling is that, despite the growing commercialism of Halloween, the holiday is a highly participatory one: one carves a jack-o-lantern from a pumpkin, one parades in costume, one might even create one's own costume (often using store-bought costumes as a starting point). Moreover, Halloween is not an official holiday – there is no day off work associated with it, and it is not decreed by any government. Although it is associated with the Christian calendar (as the Eve of All Hallows, or All Saints' Day), this connection is not widely acknowledged. Thus, the freedom of participation and the joy of creativity that people often feel, along with the inversive nature of the day and its symbolism (death and other taboos, including the mocking of politicians that have feet of clay) leads to a sense that this occasion has not been entirely co-opted by official, institutionalized interests, or by commercial interests.

I have alluded to some of the ways holidays in the 21st-century United States have become commercialized. For clarity's sake, I will specify these at this point. First, though in no particular order, I note that commercial industries furnish goods that satisfy existing customs for which there is a gift-giving tradition – for instance, in the late 19th century there was a rise in goods packaged as gifts, and also advertised as gifts [Waits 1993]. During this period, parallel to the increasing urbanization of the U.S., large department stores suggested in their advertising that household appliances were considerate gifts for housewives and that articles of clothing were perfect for the man of the house. Clearly, these efforts were based on and reinforced ideas of appropriate domesticity and gender roles. Likewise, during this period, the homemade hand-crafted toy was portrayed as hopelessly old-fashioned compared to the toys available in the department stores. Santa's role became less and less an arbiter of behavior, both good and bad, and increasingly a carrier of these commodities. Because the gifts were said to be made by elves in Santa's workshop at the North Pole, the commercial nature of the mass-produced gifts became disguised as personal and hand-made by somebody – even if an elf – and thus acceptably transformed for the Christmas occasion. The principle here is: where there is a folk tradition, it can be commercialized.

One sees this principle at work today with the growth and transformation of Halloween. The jack-o-lantern has been joined on the facades and front yards of American homes by



Figures 7, 8: Holiday-themed M&M'S® candies.

homemade dummies and bales of straw, which emphasize the harvest aspects of that celebration. As this custom has grown, large chain department stores such as Wal-Mart® have begun to sell mass-produced versions of these items.

Halloween provides an example of the second principle as well: the extension of a custom or symbol associated with one holiday to another. Christmas has been celebrated with lit candles for over a century; eventually, these were replaced with safer (and more expensive) electric candles, both on Christmas trees and in the windows of people's homes. Christmas lights have in fact become highly elaborated, put up all over one's house and property. More recently, similar lights have begun to appear in colors and shapes (e.g., ghosts, pumpkins, and witches) appropriate for Halloween. These have become quite common, due in part to the fact that darkness falls early by Halloween

(which signaled the beginning of winter in the ancient Celtic calendar). Today, similar lights are available for Easter, Valentine's Day, and Independence Day (4 July), as well as for rites of passage such as graduation and weddings. Only Halloween, however, has been entirely successful in this extension of a custom associated with one holiday to another.

Another example of commercial candy is seen in the packaging of a very popular product called M&M'S®. These are bits of milk chocolate encased in a colored sugar shell. They are available as milk chocolate, or as chocolate with peanuts or almonds. Much like the British candies called Smarties, they are sold in bags containing many different-colored individual M&M'S®. People usually eat them by the handful. Some years ago I noticed large bags available in the early spring. The bags were colored pink and purple, and images of rabbits with Easter baskets and other seasonal holiday images adorned the bag. In fact, the product was named M&M'S® Holidays, and the candies were all in pastel colors. This imagery says "Easter" to the American consumer. Later in the year, M&M'S® Holidays featured red and



Figures 9, 10: Holiday-themed socks (Valentine's Day, New Year).

green candies with Christmas images on the packages. Early in the New Year, a version was available in red and white, with hearts and cupids, for Valentine's Day. And so on, though the year... that is, M&M'S[®] "releases" holiday-themed candies on a seasonal basis. Other than the food coloring, the candies are exactly the same as those available in non-seasonally themed packages.

Eventually, I noticed that the seasonal events mentioned above were the only ones chosen for this commercialization, and I began to wonder why. One summer, the company added a U.S. flag-decorated package with red, white, and blue candies, but this was not repeated the following year. Moreover, there was no Halloween-themed package available, which surprised me, given the emphasis on candy at Halloween in the U.S. It occurred to me that the M&M'S[®] sold in packages of



Figure 11: Independence Day's Barbie.

this size were aimed primarily at adults and intended for use at holiday parties and get-togethers. The M&M'S[®] would be placed in a candy bowl, where their colors appropriate to the holiday in question would add to the festive ambience of the occasion. Independence Day is usually celebrated outdoors, often away from home, and the red, white, and blue candies would be less likely to be used. For Halloween, M&M'S[®] are widely available in small bags to be used as "treats" for the children that come begging. When the company did add an autumn-themed version, the colors were orange and brown, and the images were of autumn leaves and nuts. The candies were themed specifically to neither Halloween (31 October) nor American Thanksgiving in November. Instead, they were intended *for all your fall parties*, as stated on the package [see Santino 1996].

Interestingly, after the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, M&M'S[®] issued more of the red, white, and blue candies, in a patriotic package, this time with proceeds going to appropriate charities. The surge in nationalism and patriotism in the U.S. following 11 September has led to a growth of stars-and-stripes festooned popular products, including the red, white, and blue M&M'S[®] for the summer.

In recent years, most popular candies have followed M&M'S[®] model of holiday-themed packaging for the holidays through the year. The year in candy, however, may differ from the year as translated into other popular media. Although one can find popular fiction of all genres devoted to virtually any holiday, there are some generalizations one can make based on years of observation. For instance, romance novels unsurprisingly use Valentine's Day as both a topic of their narratives and as a packaging tool as well. Romances revolving around Mother's Day are not too uncommon, and New Year's as well. Halloween is more commonly found in mysteries, as well as horror-thrillers. Christmas is used for all genres: westerns, science fiction, romance, mystery, and so on. Christmas is the major festival of the year economically in the United States, despite its Christian origin, and the celebration overwhelms virtually all aspects of the society. Other calendrical events are less central, though, and their use tends to follow a kind of cultural logic, as seen with the Valentine's Day romances and the Halloween mysteries. The former focus on love as a theme; the latter, death.

This type of thematic linking is apparent in other media as well. Halloween imagery is used a great deal in popular musical genres such as heavy metal, punk, and hard rock generally. Halloween is an inversive holiday and these are inversive musics. In fact they frequently share imagery of death, gore, and skeletons and images of the wild, evil, uncontrollable taboos of society.

Thus, one obvious dynamic in the commercialization of a holiday is the fit between the holiday and the genre in question. A second stage occurs when the first step is successful, and an industry tries to extend the success to a different occasion. John Carpenter's slasher movie *Halloween* was extremely popular and is an example of a filmmaker exploiting Halloween imagery to enhance his story: Halloween features ghosts and other examples of the living dead. It was traditionally believed that the souls of the dead wandered on Hallo-

ween, as well as other more malevolent supernatural creatures. The movie tells the story of the return of a presumed-dead, nigh-supernatural or even immortal murderer. The use of Halloween imagery and themes here fit the film perfectly and in fact the film has in turn added to the imagery of Halloween in contemporary America. The success of this film has given rise to any number of slasher films set on other special occasions, such as Valentine's Day, Christmas, New Year's Eve, and so on. These holidays all share the quality of being a special, liminal time, but beyond this are less well-suited to slasher imagery.

Likewise, and perhaps more simply, certain candies are traditionally a part of certain specific holidays – red and white peppermint candy canes at Christmas, for instance, or yellow and orange “candy corn” at Halloween. Recently, orange candy canes have been seen for Halloween and pastel-colored “candy corn” at Easter. Here again is an attempt to move a custom laterally, from one celebration to another.

The mass media coexists with American holiday celebrations in any number of ways. Some commercial items become traditional in the sense that they are used by people in celebration of the holiday. The popular song “White Christmas,” for instance, or even “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” are both commercially produced songs (“Rudolph” began as a department store giveaway before being immortalized in song by Johnny Marks) and both are very much a part of Christmas today. Many people consider it traditional to watch certain movies, such as *It's a Wonderful Life*, or to put on their favorite Christmas music as a way of getting into the holiday mood. Of course, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is, at bottom, a piece of popular, mass-market fiction.

In this regard, what is ultimately most interesting is how people actually use the mass media and commercial goods. This is not to say that the relentless commercialization of traditional, often sacred, occasions should be overlooked or ignored. The evils and excesses of capitalism are in full force as every holiday custom is turned into a profit-making resource for big industries. Nothing, it seems, is sacred. People, however, continue to adapt their customs and traditions and create new ones. People use the products of mass culture to create meaning within the contexts of their own priorities and their own lives. Celebrations require personal interaction, and it is within the realm of interpersonal communication that real social bonds are created and maintained.

REFERENCES

- Santino, Jack
 1994 (ed.) *Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.
 1996 *New Old-Fashioned Ways. Holidays and Popular Culture*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.

Waits, William B.

1993 *The Modern Christmas in America. A Cultural History of Gift Giving*. New York: New York University Press

KOMERCIALIZACIJA, KAPITALIZEM IN PRAZNOVANJE

Tradicionalni prazniki v ZDA so opazno zaznamovani s komercializacijo. Med njimi je božič (25. 12.) zagotovo najbolj komercialno elaboriran praznik, drugo mesto v tem pogledu zavzema noč čarovnic (Halloween, 31. 10.). Prazniki so v ZDA del državnega koledarja, ki deloma odseva starejši praznični koledar in izročilo različnih skupin ljudi, ki so se v njej naselile. Državni prazniki živijo v sožitju s številnimi lokalnimi, regionalnimi, etničnimi, poklicnimi, verskimi in družinskimi praznovanji, ki pa ostajajo bolj ali manj na robu državne kapitalistične porabniške kulture.

Ključno je, da so ZDA kapitalistična dežela. Festivali porabništva so vzporedni uradnim civilnim in cerkvenim praznovanjem in soživijo v včasih nelagodni napetosti z bolj simbolično inverznimi praznovanji, ki izvirajo iz popularne ali ljudske kulture (termin popularna kultura označuje aktivnosti, katerih nosilci so ljudje, ki ne nadzorujejo tokov družbene moči; ne označuje pa množičnih medijev, kakor je pogosto v navadi. Popularna kultura in folklor sta skoraj sinonima, čeprav se prilastek »ljudski« (folk) bolj omejuje na očitno ali dozdevno bolj tradicionalne družbe.

Komercializacija praznikov se začne s prepoznavanjem tradicionalnih šeg in navad oz. prazničnih dejavnosti in prvin in njihovo »uporabo«. Opazovati jo je mogoče na več ravneh. Eden od načinov je nadomeščanje prvin praznovanj z industrijskimi izdelki (tako so npr. nekdanje sadje in oreščke nadomestili industrijski zavitki sladkarij, električne luči so nadomestile sveče, kupljena darila so nadomestila doma narejena); drugi je razširitev značilnosti praznika na drugega ali druge (npr. način okraševanja s svetili; značilen zgled za to so noč čarovnic in drugi obredi prehoda, ki jih označujejo industrijsko okrasje in napisi, električna razsvetljava, za božič ne le v hiši in za noč čarovnic ne le na okenskih policah, temveč vsepovsod, le v različnih barvah), na to raven sodijo tudi transformacije lokalne ali regionalne šege v nacionalno (npr. na ameriškem jugozahodu je izročilno latinsko božično prižiganje t. i. luminarias, tj. v pesek položnih sveč, ki osvetljujejo rjavo »papirnato kapo«: ta tip svetila se je razširil vsepovsod po ZDA – v oranžni različici za noč čarovnic in rdeči za božič).

Američani se sicer nenehno pritožujejo nad rastočo komercializacijo, vendar so ujeti vanjo: etos priročnosti in porabništva, ki mu ljudje ne zmorejo ulti, sprejemajo kot neizbežen. Na drugi strani pa je zanimivo, da ljudje v spomnih najbolj častijo ročno izdelane sledi prazničnega, povezane z medčloveškimi stiki in razmerji. Kljub obsedenosti z obdarovanjem, zlasti za božič, in množičnim kupovanjem daril, od česar živi marsikatera industrija, pa ljudje hranijo otroška darila staršem in tista izmenjana med sorodniki, in jih razkazujejo vsako leto znova.

Sem sodijo npr. doma izdelani okraski za božično drevo, ki obnavljajo družinsko zgodovino, o kateri božično drevo pripoveduje kakor družinski album.

Za noč čarovnic se je še pred dobrim desetletjem zdelo, da komercializacija praznovanja (še) ni pokvarila, vendar se ta v zadnjih letih manifestira z izjemno hitrostjo; v komercialnem pogledu je torej takoj ta božičem. Pri praznovanju so udeleženi vsi, otroci in odrasli, tako ga na poseben način zaznamuje nekakšen participatorični značaj – čeprav ni uraden praznik (ni dela prost dan, tudi z večerom vseh svetih ga ne povezujejo), je pomembno, da ljudje ob dolbenju buč, preoblačenju v kostume, ki si jih nekateri izdelajo sami itn., izražajo svojo ustvarjalnost. S simbolično inverzno naravo (smrt in njeni tabuji, vključno s šalami na račun politikov) noč čarovnic ustvarja občutek, da te priložnosti uradni in komercialni interesi še niso povsem zasegli.

Avtor prepoznava fenomen, da kjer obstaja ljudsko ali popularno izročilo, ga je mogoče tudi skomercializirati.

Noč čarovnic je mdr. tudi zgled za razširitev šege ali simbola z enega praznika na drugega: za božič značilna svetlobna razsvetljava se uporablja tudi za noč čarovnic, kar je za jesenski oz. zimski čas razumljivo, vendar so podobne luči zdaj v rabi tudi za veliko noč, valentinovo, dan neodvisnosti in za nekatere obrede prehoda (diploma, poroka), le da so drugačnih barv. Z zgledom bonbonov M&M's pokaže, kako industrija sledi prazničnemu letu; zapakirani in okrašeni so prazniku ustrezno: za veliko noč je obliv bonbonov pastelnih barv in zaviti so v papir, potiskan rožnato in vijolično, z velikonočnimi zajčki; za božič so bonbončki rdeči in zeleni, na zavitku so božične podobe; za valentinovo rdeči in beli, za dan neodvisnosti – v rdeči, beli in modri barvi ameriške zastave, za noč čarovnic oranžni iz zeleni; po 11. septembru 2001 – veliko belih, modrih, rdečih bombonov v domoljubni embalaži.

Komercializacija na višji ravni je povezana z mediji oz. drugimi žanri: gre za prevedbo prazničnega leta v medije. Nekaj značilnih posplošitev: topika romantičnih romanov je povezana z valentinovim, deloma z materinskim dnevom in novim letom (vodilni motiv je ljubezen); noč čarovnic izraža vse skrivnostno in grozljivo, zato so njen žanr grozljivke (vodilni motiv je smrt), v popularni glasbi ji ustrezajo heavy metal, pank in hard rock (kakor je noč čarovnic inverzen praznik, je to inverzna glasba – skupen imaginarij smrti, okostnjakov, divjosti, zla, nenadzorovanih družbenih tabujev); božič je »uporaben« za vse žanre (vestern, znanstvena fantastika, romantična fikcija itn.). – Obvezna dinamika komercializacije je torej v ujemanju praznika in žanra.

V naslednjem koraku se lahko industriji to dejstvo posreči razširiti na druge priložnosti: Carpenterjev film Noč čarovnic je bil izjemno popularen in uspeh kakor da bi spodbudil sorodne filme tudi za druge praznične priložnosti – valentinovo, božič, silvestrovo; čeprav je za vse značilno, da označujejo poseben, prehodni, liminalen čas, se jim »razparaski« in krvavi imaginarij prilaga precej manj.

Navezadnje pa je najzanimivejše, kako ljudje dejansko podlegajo množičnim medijem in porabniškimi izdelkom, ko je vse naravnano v kapitalski dobiček in ko se zdi, da ni nič več sveto. Pa vendar si ljudje nenehno prilagajajo svoje šege in izročila in ustvarjajo nove. Produkte množične kulture uporabljajo, da soustvarjajo pomen v kontekstu svojih lastnih prioritet in

življenja. Praznovanj ni brez osebnih stikov in prave socialne vezi se ustvarjajo in vzdržujejo le z medčloveškimi stiki in komunikacijo.

Prof. dr. Jack Santino
Department of Popular Culture, Bowling Green State University, Ohio, USA
jacksantino@hotmail.com
