

# Mass Culture or Popular Culture

— Thomas Storck —

From the immense variety in the things that God has created—the variety found in birds, bugs, rocks, leaves, clouds—we might well conclude that God himself cherishes variety, and that doubtless such variety shows forth his glory better than would a more uniform creation. But though the works of God always exhibit variety the works of man do not always do so. Human culture can exhibit variety or it can exhibit uniformity, and to a great extent this is dependent on whether there is a flourishing popular culture or merely a mass culture. But before defining these terms and addressing that specific point, let me place the entire question in its context.

Culture is the way of life common to a society. Very often when we speak of culture we are referring only to the fine arts, literature or music. It is true that these are very important parts of a culture, but culture is more than this. It includes our entire way of life, how we build houses and design cities, the kinds of technology we use and how we regard such technology, our marriage customs, our pots and pans, our economic system, our legal system—in short, whatever is common to and characteristic of any society. I will mention in passing that though everything is part of a culture, not everything is *bound* by a culture. Thus the Catholic faith, though obviously present in many cultures is not bound by any culture. The expression of the Faith may differ from culture to culture, but Catholic doctrine does not. Similarly, philosophical truths cannot be bound by a culture, though a cultural milieu certainly affects which philosophical truths are investigated and elaborated and which ones are ignored.

The word “culture” comes from the Latin *agri cultura* meaning the cultivation of a field. Cultivation is supposed to aid the plants in a field to grow according to their natures. Not everything that one might do to a young plant helps it grow to its natural fulfillment, however. The same is true of the cultivation of human beings. Not everything that one might do to us forms us according to genuine humanness. But for various reasons there is more variability in the cultivation of mankind than in the cultivation of plants, and so although human nature is the same everywhere, the cultural expressions of our common nature can well differ, so long as they are rooted in the natural and open to the supernatural. But not all cultures are equally rooted in the natural nor do they equally foster true human growth. Thus cultures are not absolutes. Not only can they change and become better or worse, but when they do not embody the most important truths or when they deform rather than foster our true humanity, then they ought to be changed. A culture that does

not accept the Gospel needs to be evangelized. But it is the trans-cultural Gospel that must be preached, not the incidental trappings of the missionary’s home culture. For even when a culture needs to be improved, this work should be undertaken according to the spirit and genius of that particular culture. That is why when authentic evangelization has occurred the resulting cultures will still differ in their expression and embodiment of the Faith.

Much of what is considered most characteristic of a culture can be put under the heading of art. What do I mean by that word? Here is the traditional definition rephrased for us moderns by Eric Gill:

[Art] means human skill, the skillful doing which results in making, so that, in its full meaning, the word ‘art’ meant, and still means, the power in the mind of man so to direct his acts that the result of his thought and actions is a thing made. But though that is the original meaning of the word, and though that meaning is still the true one, we have nowadays almost completely forgotten it, and have come to think of art as though the word did not mean all human works whatsoever, from drain-pipes to cathedrals, from paper-weights to statues of saints or politicians, from street cries to songs and symphonies, from sign-boards to Royal Academy paintings, but only the special works of the special people who paint pictures, carve or mould statues, write books and poems, and design buildings to be looked at.

Just as human beings can *know*, they can also *make*, and art is the skill for making all kinds of things. Our use of language sometimes recognizes this, for we talk not only of the fine arts but of the useful arts as well. But in mentioning this distinction, I must immediately say that it does not go very deep. The so-called fine arts are products of art in the same sense as are pots and pans. That is, they both ought to have uses and they both ought to be concerned with beauty. Let us look more closely at these two points.

First as to the question of use. Obviously no one doubts the usefulness of what we call the useful arts. But the products of the fine arts also should be meant for something. They are to be an accompaniment to life, not something separated from life. Thus painting or sculpture is not meant to be placed in some museum, to be gazed at, but to aid us in worship or for some other end. Music originally was meant to be part of life. Again in Gill’s words:

Music, if it be separated from occasion (the wedding, the funeral, the feast, the march and the Mass) is, like modern abstract painting and sculpture, nothing but a

tivation of the senses.

For our ancestors, music was something needed for a dance, for military marches, for the worship of God. Similarly painting and statuary had uses as parts of life. Even literature, especially drama, can be considered in the same manner. For many centuries much drama and poetry was performed or recited at some sort of religious festival and was meant to have more than simply an aesthetic effect. And literature as a whole can perhaps be regarded as rooted in that wider societal and cultural reference, at least regarding the question of use. It is not to be criticized with standards different in kind from those used to criticize drain-pipes or street cries.

Now as to the second criterion, beauty. The designers, that is, the artists, of "carts and carriages, of fountain-pens and foot-warmers ..." (yet again, Eric Gill's words) are typically attentive to beauty too. They want a carriage which not only fulfills well its use but is attractive to look at. The same is true of a plate or a pot or any of the useful arts. On the other hand, the question of beauty in the fine arts seems only too simple, but in fact it is not. This is because there has always been a tendency to divorce the beauties of music and painting and sculpture from their function *as arts* in society, to make their beauty a mere "titivation of the senses," as Gill said. But this is in fact a misuse of their beauty, and this now nearly universal misuse is not healthy for a culture, and since the almost complete triumph of this practice in the 19th century it has had very detrimental effects for all concerned, for the artists as well as for everyone else. (See "*Arts Gratia Artis* or *Ars Gratia Homini*" in the fall 1993 *C et T*.) So we must somehow learn to look differently at the beauties of the fine arts, reconnecting them with their functions in life. It would probably be easiest to do this with the liturgical arts, for we have not yet entirely divorced the notion of sacred art and music from the worship of God. And if we can do this with the arts meant for use in church, then perhaps we can take steps to retrain ourselves to do this with all the fine arts.

Now all this has been preliminary to my main subject, which is concerned with the question of mass culture and popular culture. But first, however, I must make one more distinction, that between high or "highbrow" culture and low or "lowbrow" culture. What is the difference between these? High culture is that culture associated with the well-educated portion of a society and "lowbrow" or low culture is that culture associated with the rest of the population. Obviously there are degrees here, as well as failures to conform to the expected norms, but by and large I think no one will dispute these two categories. At the extremes, consider the existence of a literary or philosophical Journal, and, on the other hand, of tabloid newspapers. This division, by the way, concerns more than the fine arts, for it also applies, for example, to plates and many other household objects and to clothes. Would not many a frequenter of high culture in the fine arts be embarrassed if he had to serve his guests on plates from

Woolworth's or attend a concert wearing clothes from K-Mart? So the distinction between high and low culture goes across the spectrum of most or all of the arts.

Both high culture and low culture are legitimate and necessary parts of human society and thus are good. But low culture has two very different possible manifestations or expressions, namely, mass culture and popular culture. Most often people use the terms "popular culture" and "mass culture" to mean the same thing. But I mean two different things by them. And, I will argue, one of these forms is good while the other is both the result and the further cause of harm in a society. Let us examine them more closely.

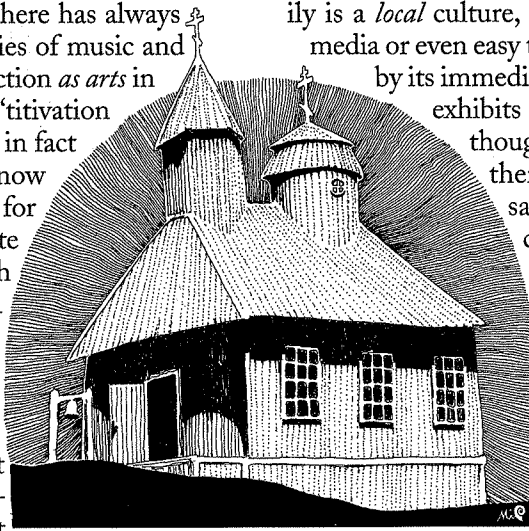
Most of us have never witnessed or experienced a real popular culture. It is rare in the Western world today, except in Latin America. What is popular culture? It is a (low) culture whose canons of the arts are based largely on tradition. They are handed on within a specific tradition which dictates, with greater or less flexibility, how cultural products are to be formed, for example, the proper way of telling a story or making or playing an instrument or decorating a pot. It necessarily is a *local* culture, since it began before the age of mass media or even easy travel and could thus be influenced only by its immediate surroundings. And since it is local it

exhibits considerable variety in different places, though often this variety is a variation on a theme, such as the many versions of the same folksong which can exist within a civilization. The salient feature of popular culture is its character of receiving what is passed down to it. Unlike high culture it is not self-reflective; it is generally content to use the same forms through many centuries, though often with considerable ingenuity, or to change these forms slowly and imperceptively. Within Western culture popular cultural traditions flourished

for centuries. And though different from high culture, they were never entirely out of touch with it, and in fact there has normally been an interaction between high and popular culture, to the benefit of both.

Mass culture, on the other hand, we are all too familiar with. It consists of the (low) cultural or artistic products which are manufactured in studios and factories and mass marketed over entire nations, or now, over entire continents or over the whole world. Its content is decided on not at the local level but by corporate executives or marketing strategists. It necessarily has very different aims from popular culture and is in fact the enemy of popular culture, since it tends to disvalue and displace it.

In industrialized countries and areas mass culture has pretty much replaced popular culture, with extremely deleterious effects. One of these effects is that high culture has become closed in on itself. Contemporary high culture often seems to be the property of a coterie and to be deliberately designed to perplex and offend the outsider. To a large extent this is because contemporary high culture is cut off from fruitful interaction with a popular culture. Necessarily high culture disdains *mass culture*, because it is painfully aware of



its superficiality, but it is sorely in need of an encounter with something outside of itself. But with popular culture nearly dead, there is nothing which might serve to let a little fresh air into the hothouse of the high cultural establishment.

There are, moreover, many other reasons to think that popular culture is superior to mass culture. In the first place I would mention the question of variety once more. The products of popular culture exhibit that same variety with which God directly endowed his creatures on earth. Since they are locally produced, according to local traditions, obviously each locale will produce its own variety, though very often, as I said, they will be variations on some larger motif common to the entire civilization or larger culture. But mass culture, as everyone knows, exhibits none of this. Its products have a sameness about them that reveals their origin in a factory or corporation rather than a workshop. And this sameness, of course, begins to infect all of life, as people use the same objects worldwide and themselves become more and more the same. Only if we believe that nothing would be lost were Lima, Peru, to have the same cultural atmosphere as Lima, Ohio, can we be content with today's reign of mass culture.

Secondly, can anyone deny that the products of popular culture are simply better than those of mass culture, more beautiful, often stronger? Folk art is highly prized; mass-produced items are rarely if ever sought after. Today the rich frequently seek out the artistic products of popular culture to adorn their living rooms or their museums. I have seen Latin American popular religious art, doubtless stolen from a church or shrine, used as decorations in the apartments of North American urban sophisticates. Though occasionally products of mass culture are thus used, after a suitable period of time has elapsed, I do not think that the average item sold by K-Mart is likely to end up used in this way.

Thirdly, it is money—or sometimes political power—that controls mass culture. Mass cultural objects are produced with expensive processes in centers of population far from many of the places where these objects will be used. They thus impose their debased forms over entire nations, today even over the entire world. And it is the richer and more powerful nations and cities that are able to impose themselves, because they not only can produce these items in greater bulk—whether recorded music or pots—but they are able to promote them by advertising and by other means so that they carry a greater prestige than do any surviving products of the local popular culture. Today North American music videos have achieved great popularity in Latin America, with a corresponding decline in appreciation for the music native to that continent. In Scotland, English commercial music has made traditional Scottish music something appreciated mostly by specialists, even in its own country. Once on a train in Ireland I was sitting near two or three Irish young people with whom I struck up a conversation. To pass the time, someone suggested singing. And though my knowledge of traditional Irish popular songs is meager, they knew *none at all*. The only songs I recall them knowing were commercial mass media songs or a few children's songs. And as a matter of fact, they were on their way to Cork to a concert of the American rock musician, Prince.

However, the most important reason for thinking that a popular culture is superior to a mass culture concerns the principle of subsidiarity and the accompanying development of potencies in man. The principle of subsidiarity was first stated explicitly by Pope Pius XI in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931. Pope Pius wrote:

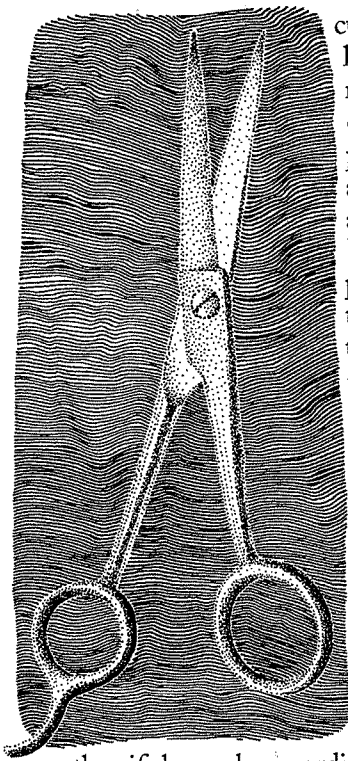
... it is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry. So, too, it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies. Inasmuch as every social activity should, by its very nature, prove a help to members of the body social, it should never destroy or absorb them. (section 79)

This principle, as originally stated, was meant to apply to the economic order only. It was a check on the centralization of economic life by either government or big business. It was also intended to encourage the formation of intermediate bodies, especially what are known as occupational groups, and thus to create industries governed by those who actually *do* the work, whether as manual workers or managers. But, as I have argued elsewhere, the principle of subsidiarity can have a wider application. This principle can, I think, be applied to other matters and in particular to artistic and all cultural creation. That is, if people can create their own songs and stories or plays and paintings, then "it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, to transfer" to radio or television stations or to manufacturers of recorded music, what can be produced just as well, indeed, better, at a lower or local level. The reason that I think this principle can be extended further is that it is ultimately based not on the economic order but on the nature of man. In *Populorum Progressio* Paul VI wrote,

... man is only truly man in as far as, master of his own acts and judge of their worth, he is author of his own advancement, in keeping with the nature which was given to him by his Creator and whose possibilities and exigencies he himself freely assumes. (no. 34)

Man is not meant to be merely a passive receiver. Each human being has potencies which can be developed, and not to develop them is not to develop as a man. For example, if we fail to learn to talk or to walk, we fail to that extent to develop and to exist as human beings. And it is a good to fulfill any true potency since God intended things to fulfill their forms. But since we are rational animals we have more potentialities than do the other animals, and obviously therefore not everyone can fulfill every potency—constraints of vocation, time, and circumstance prevent this. No one has the time to learn every language or every art. The celibate vocation of a priest of the Latin rite (and of some Eastern rites) prevents him from developing the potency to become a good husband, a potency good in itself, but not good for the priest because of his vocation.

One potency that can be actualized in a popular culture, however, is the development of a skill for the production of cultural objects that fulfill their proper function. In a mass



culture, in this important area of life, people are simply passive receivers. In a popular culture, on the other hand, many more people are actually creators of artistic products, products that are both useful and beautiful. Not everyone is a musician or a painter, it is true, but if we recall that there is really no major distinction between the fine arts and the useful arts, then the number of artists in a popular culture becomes much larger, for people will make use of not only locally made songs but locally made pots. Today mass culture has gone so far that the art of cooking is actually being destroyed, as more and more we eat packaged and mass-marketed food. But in a popular culture, almost every wife or

mother, if she cooks according to local recipes, is an artist of the art of cooking, perhaps an heir to centuries old traditions, traditions which she can surely develop, but only according to their own spirit and genius, which she certainly understands better than men in far-off corporate suites.

If it is our nature, our humanity, that sets us apart from the other animals and in fact from the rest of God's creation, how can we express that humanity, unless we fulfill the potentialities of our nature? The acorn gives glory to God by developing into an oak, not by remaining a seed. If we allow everything that reveals mankind's potentialities to fall into disuse, are we not tarnishing one image of God's glory? Unless, of course, we think that the creation of cultural objects

is so unimportant a part of human life that it can be left to those whose aims and standards are simply more and more money. But if culture is central to what it is to be human, then how can we be satisfied with the present situation?

In these words of Josef Pieper in his short book, *The Philosophical Act*, Pieper is explaining why man, who because of his intellect is able to contemplate all of reality, nevertheless needs the concrete and the familiar:

That is why man cannot live permanently "beneath the stars," *vis-a-vis de l'univers*; he needs the roof of the familiar over his head, the surroundings of everyday life, the sensual proximity of the concrete, the regularity of habit and custom. In a word: a full human life calls for environment, too, in the differentiated sense we have given it, in which environment is not "the world."

According to Aristotle and St. Thomas, matter is what individuates the forms or universals, that is, those things which make a thing what it is. Thus each horse shares equally in "horseness," and what makes each horse an individual is the matter which is informed by this form of horseness. The same is true of us humans. So our concrete individuality needs equally concrete things to nourish it—*this* place, *these* people, *these* familiar objects. And surely the concrete and individual products of the arts of a popular culture support such human concreteness better than do the bland products of a bland mass culture, a culture fueled by avarice and which tends to impose itself on the poorer and less powerful.

It may seem an impossible task to reestablish a popular culture today. I certainly admit that it is an arduous one. But it is worth knowing what is wrong with mass culture so that we may better resist it in our lives, even if we cannot just now substitute that kind of culture which was meant both to nourish us as human beings and help bring us to our final fulfillment, here and hereafter.

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