

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 32 | Number 1

Article 5

---

September 2003

## Popular Culture Regained: An Outline Towards a Christian View

Kuk-Won Shin

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Shin, Kuk-Won (2003) "Popular Culture Regained: An Outline Towards a Christian View," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 32: No. 1, 28 - 37.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol32/iss1/5](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol32/iss1/5)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

*\*Editor's Note: This is one of two papers presented, by Dr. Kuk-Won Shin at a Dordt College mini-lecture series on popular culture, April 14, 2003.*

## Popular Culture Regained: An Outline Towards a Christian View



by Kuk-Won Shin

Christian critics of popular culture often come across as grumpy spoilsports or dogmatic moralists. Such names seldom apply to Marxist and feminist critics, who are no less critical of popular culture than are Christians.<sup>1</sup> I believe that the poor quality of Christian criticism is largely attributable to the fact that Christian institutions have not always spelled out a theory of popular culture. This paper seeks to outline how to compensate for this deficiency by developing

---

*Dr. Kuk-Won Shin is Professor of Philosophy at Chongshin University in Seoul, Korea. Having served as a scholar-in-residence at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he did research in the area of aesthetics, ethics, and modern culture, he is currently a visiting scholar at the University of Illinois in Champaign.*

a Christian theory of popular culture from a Reformed perspective. I will argue that integrating the wisdom of the Reformed view of culture with what we have learned from recent theories of popular culture would help this project.

### Ontology of Popular Culture

A conceptual grasp of popular culture is not an easy task because both of its etymological components, culture and the popular, are notoriously complex terms.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, defining these terms within certain limits is required in order to avoid complications. First, the common identification of popular culture with mass art or “midbrow” art calls for reexamination.<sup>3</sup> Popular culture is a broader phenomenon than mass art because it includes multidimensional practices associated with the art. Distinctions between art and culture are crucial here. Art refers to the production and display or performance of aesthetic objects and activities, whereas culture includes entire conditions, processes, and practices related to art. Art and culture are inseparable. Art is created in a culture, yet both in turn generate broad effects on life as a whole. This explanation of the relationship between art and culture opposes a narrow identification of popular culture with what people do with mass art only in and for leisure. At the same time, it also contests the excessive socio-political focus of contemporary cultural studies.

Second, I prefer “popular” to “mass” as the name for the agent of popular culture. I agree with John Fiske that “popular” means of the people.<sup>4</sup> Popular culture, then, is the culture of the people. It may not be always formed by the people, but it must be adopted by the people and used for them in order to

be genuine popular culture. The notion of the "popular" avoids the negative connotations of the "mass" identified by theorists like Jose Ortega Y. Gasset. He argues that the mass is "the assemblage of persons not specially qualified."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the "mass" tends to lose positive identity and a sense of responsibility to become a "mob." Further trouble is caused by what he calls "the revolt of the mass," the advancement of the mass in the areas that the elites used to occupy.<sup>6</sup> Mass culture is "the revolt of the mass" in culture, or "anarchy" in Arnoldian terms.<sup>7</sup> It is comparable to hyperdemocracy in politics and the labor movement in economics. I choose "popular" in conscious contrast to the anonymous "mass." People have identity on the basis of religious belief, worldview, language, ethnicity, locality, tradition, history, and internal and external relations.<sup>8</sup> People have an historical, individual, and social identity to which culture is tied.

Popular culture, then, refers to distinctive cultural practices related to the art of people in the so-called "mass society." Several theorists use "mass" in a neutral sense. Noel Carroll, for example, insists that mass art simply refers to art "designed to seek out a mass audience, irrespective of class."<sup>9</sup> Carroll uses "mass" to signify only large numbers of people. He wants to avoid both Fiske's favoritism of "popular" and Gasset's negative notion of "mass." However, his effort does not neutralize the negative tone set by Ortega Y. Gasset. The mass is all too often associated with the socio-political conditions resulting from modern capitalist industrialization and its concomitant urbanization. Even Carroll implies an evaluative sense when he uses the phrase "mass art" as antithetical to elite avant-garde art.<sup>10</sup> When the production, distribution, and consumption of arts are affected by conditions of mass society, the nature and quality of the art are bound to be altered.<sup>11</sup> Carroll's definition of mass art shows well how massification affects the quality of art:

X is a mass artwork if and only if 1. X is a multiple instance or type of artwork, 2. Produced and distributed by a mass technology, 3. Which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (for example, its narrative forms, symbolism, intended effect, and even its content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audience.<sup>12</sup>

This definition is helpful for both setting a boundary to mass art and articulating the ontological conditions of popular culture. Mass art based in mass

media is the center axis of popular culture, though popular culture may not be limited to mass art based in mass media.<sup>13</sup> Contemporary popular culture is not possible independent of modern mass-communication technology and capitalist market economy. Contemporary popular culture is also related to the existence of large numbers of people with untutored taste who enjoy unprecedented leisure. The common people as potential patrons of the mass arts have gained leisure through the capitalist industrial revolution.

These conditions definitely affect the form and content of the arts. For one thing, mass art largely consists of unsophisticated narratives. This characteristic gives an occasion for critics to argue that mass art leads audiences only to "unreflective

---

*The success of mass arts is based on their ability to capitalize on the common denominator with the help of effective technology and marketing tactics.*

---

enjoyment" while art urges them to engage in a creative response. Furthermore, mass arts are in general less original and personal in production. The massification of the art production and distribution system is similar to other commercial mass products. Mass arts are actually produced through application of a formula that is designed to appeal to the "common denominator in terms of taste, sensitivity, and intelligence in its potential audience."<sup>14</sup> The formula intends to generate "generic, fore-ordained emotions." The success of mass arts is based on their ability to capitalize on the common denominator with the help of effective technology and marketing tactics. In our day, even high art tends to imitate mass arts in order to be competitive. This tendency certainly contributes to lower aesthetic standards and qualities. For this reason, critics feared that popular culture would make high and even folk culture obsolete. This fear is real because the latter simply cannot match popular culture in marketing. A Gresham's law is applicable also in aesthetics.<sup>15</sup>

However, this dim picture should not lead to a total denigration of mass art. It may be conceded

that many popular cultural products are in general aesthetically inferior. However, this fact does not cancel their significance. Indeed, one should not overlook the idea that mass arts have artistic as well as socio-political, even "theological, homiletic, and catechetical" functions.<sup>16</sup> Mass arts have these functions because they are the most pervasive and effective storytellers of our age. Art has a mythological function in its activity of defining reality. Popular cultures, and especially mass arts, convey world-views through this function.

Johan Huizinga effectively conceptualizes this idea of the arts and culture in his identification of play as the foundation of culture.<sup>17</sup> Play implies education, schooling, and character building (*diagoge, schole, paideia*) because it consists of narratives that define reality. Mass arts and popular culture are the people's play today. In fact, Huizinga's insight into culture as play is more readily applicable to popular culture than to other categories like politics, war, or sciences that he listed. Popular culture as the multi-dimensional practices associated with the mass arts is the communal play of the people. Mass arts and popular culture are involved with communal life because the stories that they tell are never monologues but always inter-subjective communications. Arts invite interpretation and evoke action.<sup>18</sup> Art and stories both reflect and initiate life. As the narratives shared by the people, mass arts define the reality of communal life more than any other type of art. Mass art provides people with occasions to build community through communal sharing. In short, mass arts and popular culture function as the forum of communal inter-plays.

This ontological analysis of mass arts and popular culture throws significant light on our effort to understand their nature. Above all, it is clear that understanding popular culture requires not only knowledge of the aesthetics of mass arts but also knowledge of the complex practices of mass arts in a given society. Such knowledge is important because it is in these practices that the arts accomplish their functions. Critics often overlook the functional significances of the arts. It is one thing to expose the aesthetic weakness of mass arts, but it is another to realize their significance in "enlightenment" as well as "entertainment" functions.<sup>19</sup> Mass art is engaged in much more than the simple business of filling leisure with pleasure and amusement. Mass arts are the most pervasive aesthetic experiences of people today and have a great deal to do with important social func-

tions: constructing identity and intimacy, preserving collective memories, forming and strengthening social consensus, carrying out social criticism, and expressing communal celebration.<sup>20</sup>

This combined aesthetic and socio-political approach to mass arts and popular culture affords a holistic understanding of them. It is important to understand the function, practices, and effects of mass arts as well as their conditions and status. Considering mass arts in both distinction and relation eliminates the discussion of whether the meaning of popular culture is created in production or consumption. It is created in both and in dialogue. Culture is where artists and people meet together in producing and consuming art that creates and celebrates communal meaning and cultic expression, both of which are playful aspects of their shared life. Such is the case in mass arts and popular culture as well as in classical arts. The important question is whether contemporary mass arts and popular culture perform this function properly. If they do not, it is important to find the reason.

### Flaws of Popular Culture

A few problems of popular culture are already implied in the above discussion of its nature. Having those flaws in mind, critics maintain that popular culture is at best kitsch or ersatz culture. Some even argue that it is not culture at all. Critics argue that the aesthetic flaws stem from "commercialization" and "massification" as two characteristics of mass art. This is another way of describing the nature of mass art and popular culture. Of course, commercialization is not unique to mass art. The arts have always been sponsored by various patrons while many mass artists resist commercialization. However, the commercial motive is the source of the problem because of mass art's general tendency to maximize profit by drawing the maximum audience. Trouble resides in surrendering the enormous commercial potential of mass art to the capitalist market economy.

The impersonality of formulaic production resulting from massification is often counted as a fundamental defect in contrast to the expressiveness of the individuality of artists in genuine art. Defenders of mass art spurn such a critique as elitist, as prejudiced by the "expression theory" of art.<sup>21</sup> They argue that some arts are simply formal. Form as well as expression in content is art. However, scholars like Abraham Kaplan dispute this defense with a critique of the

formlessness of mass art. He consents that a formulaic nature is not a defect since many high arts are formulaic too. The trouble is that mass arts "simply rather lack form." A form only comes to exist in subjective experiences through creative engagement with art. Mass art substitutes shape for form through schematization.<sup>22</sup> Aesthetic perception is replaced by simple recognition. There is no engaging creative interpretation and dialogue with artistic symbols, but simple reaction to signals. The trouble lies in that mass arts leave audiences no room for aesthetic experience. In this sense, mass art is dictatorial.

Thus, the defense that there is no evidence for an "inevitable" lowering of aesthetic quality due to commercialization and massification becomes less convincing in the face of these critiques. The defense of the accessibility of mass art misses the mark, since the trouble is not that mass arts are easy and simple, but that they provide predigested enjoyment in order to spare the audience effort. Making art accessible is not an evil in itself, but it is so if it "abets passive spectatorship with minimum effort, breeds an attitude of fast pick up immediacy."<sup>23</sup> Thus, concern for the danger of passivity is particularly valid. Operating on familiarity, mass arts have nothing to challenge the audience. Naturally, there is nothing new to discover in or to learn from mass art. Mass art only reaffirms what the audience knows and believes.

Mass art, for this reason, is often considered mere entertainment at best. Critics fear the infantilization of the audience, for the taste of mass art is immature. The taste of mass art cannot afford ambiguity and demand effort. As Kaplan argues, mass arts at best substitute ambiguity for complexity. These arguments support the common sense suspicion of the low aesthetic and cultural value of mass art.<sup>24</sup>

Other critics focus on problems in socio-political practices associated with mass art and its negative ramifications, such as ideological domination, class conflicts, sexual discrimination, economic exploitation, and moral depravity. On the one hand, ideological critics are concerned that mass art and popular culture exploit people economically and politically.<sup>25</sup> They argue that mass art is a subtle means of capitalist and technological domination over the masses. Contrary to the etymological sense, mass art and popular culture are not from below but are "imposed from above."<sup>26</sup> Popular culture is, in fact, aristocratic.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, this criticism is countered by the claim that popular culture can be a means of

disrupting the cultural hegemony of the rich and the powerful. Some critics propose that the dialectics between production and consumption of mass art and popular culture are not as simple as the above mentioned ideological critics claim. These other critics entertain the opposite assumption, that popular culture is formed not merely by the production of mass art but also more importantly at their consumption.<sup>28</sup> For the protagonists of this thesis, mass art and popular culture have the advantages of being people's culture dependant on consumers' choice and consumers' influence on producers.

Both socio-political critiques and defenses of mass art and popular culture score insights, yet they have difficulties too. Despite helpful exposure of

---

*There is no engaging creative interpretation and dialogue with artistic symbols, but simple reaction to signals.*

---

hegemony elements in mass art and culture, one fundamental problem with these critics is that they simply identify art with culture and use culture to identify class. "The elimination theory" is another example, arguing that both high and popular cultures only refer to class distinction.<sup>29</sup> A similar tendency is prevalent among Marxist theorists and postmodern culture scholars. Feminist critics employ a similar perspective. Their perspective on art and culture is narrowly focused and reduces both to politics. This reductionism is due to their Marxist philosophical foundation in analyzing the domination and liberation elements of mass art and popular culture. These two apparently opposite arguments show that often socio-political critiques of popular culture are tainted by political commitments and result in very different analyses of the situation. The chief danger of identifying culture with socio-political factors is that it induces the idea of culture wars. Such a danger is clear in the thinking of Antonio Gramsci, who developed the idea of culture as war.

It is not only ideological critics who are susceptible to the definition of culture as identity. Many religious and ethical critics of culture have a similar tendency. James D. Hunter, who is well known for his book on "culture wars," is an example.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Christian

critics often join this sort of social criticism, not because of political interest but primarily because of moral concerns. They abhor the immoral content of mass entertainment. They are also worried about the hostile environment that it breeds against faith. Kenneth Myers captures this concern well when he claims that modern times will prove to be "the darkest age of all" under the influence of popular culture.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, parent organizations, social activists, and educators stress the negative influences on spectators and especially on children and family life.

It is only natural that such claims and any social actions arising from them spur reactions from anti-protectionists who fear censorship. Supporters of popular culture and mass art commonly counter criticism by appealing to freedom of expression.<sup>32</sup> Especially artists and entertainment industries resort to the right to freedom of expression when they are accused of contributing to moral degeneration. They argue that no harmful effect of popular culture has been conclusively proven.<sup>33</sup> They are fond of pointing out studies of the beneficial effects of popular culture through "surrogated satisfaction," which reduces sexual and violent crimes. It may be hard to prove scientifically the detrimental effects of mass art and mass media entertainment. However, critics do have ways to argue their points: facts about media effects, common sense experiences, and numerous cases that prove their arguments. Just as the negative effect is not proven, neither is the no-effect theory. No theoretical argument may be conclusive, hence the enduring conflicts between protesters and defenders. Yet one thing is at least clear: having no clear conclusion for or against the harms of mass art and popular culture does not make those critics wrong and dogmatic.

As we have seen, critics and defenders score insights for clarifying problems of popular culture. However, they miss a critical point in identifying the ultimate problem. It has been Christian wisdom, particularly a Reformed one in recent times, that holds culture as based on cult, or religious faith. In this perspective, aesthetic and political elements are not ultimate in shaping art and culture.<sup>34</sup> Art and culture are ways of expressing ultimate commitments. Any attempt to locate the ultimate problems in mass arts and popular culture, therefore, would have to look at the spiritual conditions of "mass society."

Critics have suggested that the problem is "loss of leisure." This suggestion is ironic because modern

people enjoy more leisure than anyone else in history thus far. Yet in another sense, modern people have lost true leisure, as the natural balance and rhythm of work and rest are disrupted through conditions of modern industrial society. Marxists are right in pointing out that people are alienated from work in industrial society and have lost meaning and enjoyment in work. This alienation has come about not only because of economic and ideological domination and exploitation but also partially because of an inhumane focus on efficiency and productivity. The integration of work and rest is shattered; the meaning and purpose of life are distorted. Therefore, extending the criticisms to technological modernity and its principle of efficiency as a whole has a point. With a sole emphasis on work and efficiency, modern culture has lost the natural rhythm of life. Thus, until recent years, few Christian analysts critiqued the domination of work and its principle of efficiency.

Now is the time to look at the other danger. Subversion of work and rest is deeply entrenched in the lifestyle of industrialized affluent society. Having lost meaning in work, yet having secured money and leisure, people seek to compensate for the loss of that meaning. As a result, the demand for amusement rapidly increases, and entertainment inundates life. This effort to compensate for loss of meaning in work explains why, unlike old festivities dully placed in a limited time and space, contemporary entertainment pervades all aspects of life. Leisure is also distorted and has replaced the meaning of rest with indulgence, addiction, and hyper activism. Leisure tends to become mere diversion or restlessness. As a Reformed confession insightfully puts it, "Seeking pleasure, we lose the gift of joy."<sup>35</sup>

Meaning is seldom recovered in consuming the commercialized leisure that is provided by mass art and popular culture because the experts (capitalists and talented artists) dominate, alienate, and subjugate people as mere passive spectators and consumers.<sup>36</sup> The claim that people have power in consumer choice overlooks the possibility that much of that choice could be manipulated. Popular culture is "popular" often because of effective technological production, marketing, and advertisement. Therefore, the application of mass media dominated by what Jacques Ellul calls "technique" in popular culture raises real concerns.<sup>37</sup> Mass art and popular culture represent the loss of the last domain of

humanity, that is play, to technology and method, to capitalist economics and an ideology of efficiency. This situation has definitive socio-political implications. Technological elites may dominate the public not only in the area of work but also in leisure, supposedly the last reserve of human creativity and freedom. A loss of initiative and a passive attitude toward leisure are also caused by the same root problem of the modern world, namely "technique."

Kaplan explicates such fearful concerns in his analysis from an aesthetic viewpoint of individualism and sentimentalism in mass art. He argues that mass art breeds illusive and unrealistic sentiment that is built on an individualistic narcissist world. The individualistic enjoyment is the source of sentimentalism that operates in a closed circuit: "The self-centeredness of popular culture is the measure of our own diminishing."<sup>38</sup> Individualistic narcissism is a legacy of both romanticism and the bourgeois revolution of individualism. It is the world consumed from the single perspective of the individual consumer. The community is lost in a private search for pleasure in an increasingly individualized world of entertainment technology. Popular culture is not creative but reproductive. People domesticated with surrogated, superficial, individualistic, and passive enjoyments lose identity and community. An anonymous mass without identity and purpose is indeed at risk of losing its ethical sense.

All these difficulties fundamentally derive from the dichotomy between work and leisure that is characteristic of modern industrialized society. An immediate danger of the work-leisure dichotomy is a loss of natural balance and rhythm. Now we are facing the danger of popular culture that tends to breed lifestyles that reduce life to self-destructive obsessive pleasure seeking, to "amusing ourselves to death."<sup>39</sup> Political oppression is less a danger than the obsession with pleasure. Play dies when it loses boundary, mutuality, and norms; it becomes licentious orgy, and work becomes labor and drudgery. Also, the loss of norm in mass art and popular culture creates ethical and aesthetical problems: idolizing money, popularity, external beauty, pleasure, and fun.<sup>40</sup> The loss of norms may even increase boredom rather than relieving it.<sup>41</sup> In sum, mass art and popular culture have problems with aesthetics. They lose the element of play in culture wars and entertainment, and they lack genuine leisure. Any attempt to recover mass art and popular culture must address these issues.

## Redemptive Strategies for Popular Culture

### (1) *Recovery of Holistic Leisure*

Christians have often used a kind of social criticism of popular culture that includes media literacy programs, watchdog groups, lobbying activities, and boycotts. These actions highlight both the producer's responsibility for public morality and the consumer's discernment and moderation as virtues required for living in popular culture.<sup>42</sup> These actions are commendable as far as they recognize that Christians cannot either pretend to be outsiders or desert popular culture outright, since both steps would only make the situation worse. Yet the actions used are primarily negative actions with limited impact. Furthermore, in the worst cases, they may result in

---

*Popular culture is not creative  
but reproductive.*

---

culture wars. Since the problems are not created by just the entertainment industry, opposing them is not sufficient. The entertainment industry's success and popularity are based on people's demand for amusement. That is why it can claim to give people what they want. The remedy requires changes in people's demands and, in turn, their lifestyle. Particularly, a transformation of attitude toward leisure is called for.

Leisure is not itself evil, since it existed before the fall as Sabbatical rest. It is no less important than work as a legitimate component of life. In fact, leisure is now more significant in the harsh reality of modern industrialized society, in which all classes of people, not just the proletariat, are totally work-bound.<sup>43</sup> Christians often emphasize work over rest and tend to find meaning in work alone. This tendency is a variation of the sacred and secular dualism. The Reformed tradition has an advantage in overcoming this dichotomy because it holds a unique worldview in which all human activity—leisure as well as work, entertainment as well as the arts, worship as well as play—pertains to the divine mandate of culture. In this perspective, both work and leisure find equal meaning and fulfillment in accordance with the divine calling.

Both work and leisure become a problem as their holistic balance and rhythm are distorted. The loss of a balance of work and rest calls for

reintegration. Particularly the false dichotomy between work and leisure needs to be removed because it is the root of the problem. Work and leisure are not antithetical. Leisure is not separated from work, education, worship, or morality. The proper integral relation between work and rest is significant for the recovery of meaning for both. As a Catholic philosopher, Josef Pieper points out, "leisure is an attitude of mind and a condition of the soul that fosters a capacity to perceive the reality of the world."<sup>44</sup> Man shall live neither for work nor for leisure alone. Man shall live according to a proper balance and rhythm of work and rest. A holistic view of leisure must be regained.

Above all, such a rest is enjoyed through a proper relationship with one who gives meaning to both work and leisure. Without meaningfulness, life is restless. Genuine rest and leisure are the foundation of work in this perspective. With this insight, the Reformed tradition may help expose problems of popular culture and suggest solutions, especially for its spiritual condition, since Reformed thinking is engaged in a "transcendental critique" of culture in search of its religious roots and worldviews.<sup>45</sup>

## **(2) Inner Reformation of Popular Culture**

Art and culture cannot be indifferent to ethics and politics, particularly to their social influence. Art and culture must not be judged only by aesthetics. While art always has influenced life, popular culture also influences life powerfully with its massiveness and the effectiveness of its high-tech communication. The result of this influence is a profound need for ethical criticism of both mass art and popular culture, particularly because ethical criticism is not practiced in meaningful and influential ways today. Moral criticism of art has not been appreciated for some time.

It is true that a redemptive effort to reform popular culture needs to avoid the moral reduction of arts (for example, reduction of arts to moral and immoral texts). While morality is important, popular culture cannot be judged by ethical norms alone. Moral criticism of art and popular culture is necessary, yet that criticism should not be separated from aesthetic principles. Without an integration of these two, critics can fall easily into moralistic dogmatism. Moralism is legitimate concern gone bad. The Reformed tradition recognizes that art and popular culture have their own legitimate domains and irreducible roles in life: "Art needs no justification."

Art is not an attachment to life but has in some sense a most serious power. Its uniqueness lies in its aesthetic and imaginative experience. Thus, mass art and entertainment have distinctive functions and purposes.

However, one needs to avoid a danger related to a legitimate recognition of the functions of art and popular culture, that of uncritically echoing the defensive arguments that popular culture does function properly. One needs to be careful in accepting mass art and popular culture as viable or even desirable because they function as one.<sup>47</sup> Mass art and popular culture are in principle highly flawed in their tendencies of massification, commercialization, narcissistic individualism, and so on. Popular culture does function as culture not because of its principles but in spite of its principles. Although mass art and popular culture are not "structurally" flawed in their massiveness, popularity, and accessibility, they are often "directionally" problematic in the way that their potentials are abused and misused. Just as high culture has evil tendencies as well as virtues, popular culture has even stronger tendencies to which Christian critics need to pay special attention.

In order to detect and compensate for its flaws, popular culture must make a redemptive effort to consider the aesthetics of mass art. Unless the principles of mass art at the center of popular culture are transformed, all other efforts will have only secondary benefits. There is lot to learn from "moral fiction" because many problems of popular culture arise from ethical deficiencies rooted in and compounded by aesthetically delicate problems. The best example is the debates surrounding the definition of pornography and art.<sup>48</sup> It is encouraging that in recent years, a new movement has been developing in which aesthetics and ethics are studied as related topics more than previously.<sup>49</sup> Even in the entertainment industry, moral concern has become a topic of interest.<sup>50</sup> Mass art follows aesthetic principles that may be different from those of classical or folk art. However, the differences do not overshadow the similarities. Therefore, efforts for an "inner reformation" of mass art and popular culture can be strengthened by learning from specialized yet combined critiques of the aesthetics and ethics of mass art.<sup>51</sup> An integrated aesthetic and ethical critique can contribute to developing positive, healthy, educational, community-affirming alternatives in popular culture.



### (3) *Pluralist Cultural Tactics*

Political criticisms of popular culture show merits in clarifying its historical background and socio-economic-political conditions. They show that conflicts in culture are as fierce as in politics or economics. They also reveal that the so-called "culture wars" are in fact surrogate warfare. Many critics have suggested cultural pluralism as the solution to the cultural conflicts. They propose that cultural diversity is the best way for peaceful coexistence and human survival. Their proposal is based on the assumption that the nature of art and culture shows that life is plural and its values are relative.

Cultural pluralism is a favorite defense for mass art and popular culture.<sup>52</sup> This perspective has merit in avoiding the binary distinction of high/low culture. It holds that, in opposition to the elitist idea of culture as "perfection," no culture is either "perfect" or "worthless." Instead, popular culture is equal to high and folk culture.<sup>53</sup> Christians may agree with this proposal, since their faith does not oblige them always to endorse high culture and disdain people's culture. Both cultures can be either good or bad. The alternative to popular culture is not necessarily high culture. As Kaplan argues, there is a legitimate place for popular culture as well as for high art. As we have discussed, critics of popular culture, despite insights, are not without their own difficulties. There is a grain of truth in the claim that popular culture has advantages over high culture as people's culture because it is biased toward the mass.<sup>54</sup> This argument reveals that critics themselves are often biased. It allows us to view popular culture on equal terms with high and folk cultures. Specifically Christian identity lies in a holy living that transcends high and low binary culture distinctions.

Nevertheless, employing this pluralist thesis as a tactic to defend and to promote a version of "Christian pluralist culture" requires special care. Instead of accepting a pluralist agenda, the Reformed approach has an advantage, in its historical experience, of a cultural strategy of "pillarization."<sup>55</sup> This experience is one of its assets, particularly in a post-modern pluralist age. Its wisdom allows its followers to entertain both structural pluralism and a directional critique of popular culture. It is a way to recognize the plurality of culture without accepting its relativity. Christians live in the same condition as others, but differently. "In the world, but not of the world" is

their motto. Christians need to be different in this world, but that difference does not mean that they are required to be always belligerent. In particular, Christians need to move beyond binary notions of high/low culture wars. A redemptive view must avoid reducing culture to politics. Christians are called primarily to be redemptive, engaging constructively the socio-political, economic, and technological conditions of popular culture. They may even enjoy entertainment, but they should enjoy it differently, with discernment, moderation, and most of all with critical appraisal. Cultural pluralism does not mean that there is no better or worse culture. No cultural relativism is implied in the view.<sup>56</sup>

---

*Specifically Christian identity  
lies in a holy living that  
transcends high and low  
binary cultural distinctives.*

---

### (4) *Recovery of Communal Culture*

The most difficult challenge for contemporary Western society has been identified as individualism. This challenge may undermine efforts to reform popular culture. An ethical approach to reforming contemporary culture fails if it "equates culture with the aggregated attitudes of autonomous individuals." People, not just independent and autonomous individuals, must be recovered as agents of culture. People must have a solid sense of communal identity based on their specific being in order to be ethically equipped cultural agents. This sense of communal identity is not intended to deny the importance and effectiveness of strengthening individual virtue in consuming popular culture. Instead, it highlights the fact that popular culture has a broader dimension. Individuality and communality must be harmonized in the idea of communal existence as "we" beyond Cartesian "ego."

Unlike Gasset's "mass," people are not just objects of manipulation or dumb audiences of empty entertainment. As "proletarian" is not a class or economic category, neither is "mass." Mass is a spiritual category.<sup>58</sup> The practices related to art are not one directional. Popular culture is increasingly interactive, between production and consumption. Popular

culture does not mean domination of the cultural elite over the people. Yet popular culture is not a field where sovereign consumers exercise their free choices either. The interactive nature of popular culture is the basis of responsibility for reform efforts on the part of the people. This notion does justice to not only the personality and agency of the mass but also its historical situatedness. Popular culture in principle is the culture of the people. Without a recovery of a clear communal sense of identity, responsibility, and intimacy, a recovery of popular culture would be illusory. As Piper points out, true leisure and rest are spiritual conditions of being at home with identity and intimacy that only correct relation affords. Individual virtue is for the micro level. "Civility" is the foundation for virtue in a macro critique.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, a Christian alternative vision requires something more than just a cure for the problems of mass art and popular culture. Society as a whole will be transformed only through a new vision of life and culture. This is why I believe that the insights of two recent philosophical schools—communitarian ethics and philosophical hermeneutics—may assist Christian efforts. Communitarian ethics realizes that the recovery calls for communal efforts to construct discernment, education, and the well-being of community. The interpretive and dialogical approach of hermeneutics is suitable for dealing with cultural processes. Both hermeneutics and communitarian ethics see this communal effort as a vital virtue in our post-modern world, a virtue that must be retrieved or revived. Creative criticisms affect popular culture at the production level, even if ethical criticism of popular culture is not a common practice. Criticism is a mode of cultural dialogue. Play is always communal and involves responsibility toward other people. Since most popular entertainment takes the form of story telling, the best way to approach popular entertainment is to develop a hermeneutic that is proper to its nature.

In an effort to recover or reform popular culture, Christians must be confident enough to propose a community lifestyle of God's children as the alternative to an individualistic lifestyle. The work of cultural apologetics must present the Christian way of life with fear and gentleness, yet with conviction. Such an effort requires many of the activities discussed above. For example, overcoming the alienating and individualistic tendency of contemporary popular culture<sup>60</sup> would take, above all, the development of Christian

art and culture in obedience to the command, to "[respond] to each other in song and praises" (Eph 6:18-19).

#### END NOTES

1. For example, the first philosophical critics of popular culture, Adorno and Horkheimer, are Marxists. Tania Modleski and Laura Mulvey are famous for their feminist critique of "male gaze" in popular culture. John Storey, 129ff. Well-known critics of popular culture Neil Postman and Michael Medved are Jewish.
2. Cf. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976); A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluchhohn, "Culture: A Critical Review of Concept and Definitions," *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology*. Vol. 47, No. 1. (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1952).
3. Abraham Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Spring, 1966, pp. 352-353.
4. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1989); *Reading the Popular* (Cambridge: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1989).
5. Jose Ortega Y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton, 1932), p. 13.
6. J. Ortega Y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, p. 18.
7. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1939).
8. This is the meaning of "tribe" that Quentin Schultze refers to. "Introduction," *Christianity and The Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, forthcoming in 2004).
9. Noel Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 187.
10. N. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture*, p. 191ff.
11. N. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture*, p. 191.
12. N. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture*, p. 196.
13. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (London: The Freed Press of Glencoe, 1957), Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., pp. 457-459.
14. N. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture*, p. 20. Carroll here refers to the notions of "pseudo-art," "ersatz culture," and "kitsch" that Collingwood and Greenberg, and MacDonald criticize.
15. N. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture*, p. 23-24.
16. Andrew Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1988), p. 296.
17. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), p. 5. Huizinga argues culture is a sub specie ludi.

18. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward Christian Aesthetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 1-18.
19. William D. Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in America Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 333-338; Quentin J. Schultze, etc. *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).
20. P. Lazarsfeld, "Mass Communication," pp. 457-473; Also see, W. Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars*, chapters 1, 2, and 13.
21. N. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture*, p. 17. cf. p. 61.
22. Abraham Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Spring, 1966: 354.
23. N. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture*, pp. 34, 36.
24. A. Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," p. 353.
25. T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1990), pp. 120-167.
26. Dwight MacDonald. "A Theory of Mass Culture," in *Mass Culture*, p. 60.
27. A. Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," p. 354.
28. J. Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, pp. 129-158.
29. N. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture*, pp. 176-184.
30. James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991); *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).
31. Kenneth A. Myers. *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1989), p. 132.
32. For example, this is the fundamental position of the ACLU.
33. Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and The War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 240.
34. K. A. Myers. *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, p. 76.
35. *Contemporary Confession of Faith*, Christian Reformed Church. Article 15.
36. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995).
37. Clifford G. Christians, John P. Ferre, and P. Mark Fackler, *Good News: Social Ethics & the Press* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
38. A. Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," p. 360.
39. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).
40. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, pp. 210-211.
41. Richard Winter, *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion and Wonder* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
42. Quentin J. Schultze, *Redeeming Television: How TV Changes Christians—How Christians Can Change TV* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992); *Winning Your Kids Back from the Media* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994); *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000)
43. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1998) p. 43.
44. J. Pieper, *Leisure*, p. 30.
45. Herman Dooyeweerd, *New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij H. J. Paris, 1953). Many Christians thinkers, from Augustine to Paul Tillich, have argued that there is a religious root for culture.
46. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 151.
47. A. Greeley, *God in Popular Culture*; cf. W. Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars*.
48. Richard Serra, "Art and Censorship," in *Ethics and the Arts*, David E.W. Fenner, ed., (New York: Garland Pub, 1995), pp. 29-39; Mary Devereaux, "Protected Space: Politics, Censorship, and the Arts," pp. 41-58; R. Shusterman, "Aesthetic Censorship: Censoring Art for Art's Sake," pp. 59-74.
49. D.E.W. Fenner, ed., *Ethics and the Arts*; Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998); *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.
50. Miguel Valenti, *More than Movie: Ethics in Entertainment* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).
51. There is much insight in the study of "moral fiction" developed by people like John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) and Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
52. N. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Culture*, p. 18.
53. For example, Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 3-25.
54. Gans, Fishwick, and Carroll oppose the so-called "elimination theory."
55. One of the best explications of "pillarization" is found in John L. Hiemstra, *Worldviews on the Air: The Struggle to Create a Pluralistic Broadcasting System in the Netherlands* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997).
56. Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).
57. James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), p. 247.
58. J. Pieper, *Leisure*, p. 42. The idea of the people, or *laos* in Liberation theology, even has spiritual and theological implications.
59. Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Civility: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).
60. A. Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," p. 360.