MASS CULTURE VERSUS POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract. Mass culture is one of the most discussed issues of contemporary times. The development of mass culture was possible due to the urbanization process, the industrial revolution and the development of mass communication. U. Eco is collected arguments against mass culture, as voiced by various critics: the standardization of content, the commercialization of art, the trivialization of the products of high culture, the promotion of passive attitudes towards content and the deadening of historical consciousness. On the other hand, according to supporters of mass culture, it popularizes culture among the masses, which previously did not have access to it. In addition, man always has the need for simple entertainment. The distinction between high culture and mass culture is invalid due to the problematic nature of classifying artwork into one of the two categories. It is impossible to determine what will advance into the category of high culture in the future. The term mass culture is often used as a synonym – both in everyday speech and in academic writing – for popular culture. In fact their meanings partially overlap, and are partially different. Popular culture was spread also via direct contact, and not only via technical means. We can actively participate in popular culture. Cultural changes are currently taking place, regardless of our attitude towards them. We can – using the terminology of U. Eco – adjust to it or await the final Apocalypse.
Key words: mass culture, high culture, popular culture.

Mass culture

As once stated by Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, the term *mass culture* is one of the most discussed issues of contemporary times. He explained that this is due to the fact that these two words encompass issues from various fields of life, including: the cinema and television, popular music and phenomena linked with fashion and customs. Toeplitz also associated the term with increasing population growth (Toeplitz, 1981, 5-6).

Wladyslaw Kopalinski writes that the term *mass culture* was formed in the 1940s in the USA. It is loaded with esthetic, entertainment and intellectual content specific for an urbanized society. This content is transmitted via mass media. In order to reach the maximum number of recipients the content includes little intellectual and aesthetic value. Often the subject matter is simplified and vulgarized (Kopaliński, Wiankowska-Ładyka, 1999, 217.).

K. T. Toeplitz also traces its origins to the times following the Second World War (Toeplitz, 1975, 132), and the development of mass society. The term *mass society* was defined by Herbert Blumer. According to Blumer mass society differs from other forms of collectivity due to a heterogonic social composition, the anonymity of its members, the existence of poor interactions between anonymous participants, and the lack of ability to act jointly (Goban-Klas, 2005, 211.)

Societies which fulfill all the above criteria were formed mainly in large industrial centers in the 19th century. The urbanization process was accompanied by various social phenomena. Among these, according to Dominic Strinati, were: an eradicated devotion to the land, the destruction of

close-knit rural societies, the secularization of society, the establishment of new life models in urban cities populated by anonymous crowds as well as poor moral integration (Strinati, 1998, 18.). Social interactions began to take on new meanings. Previously people had close emotional and social ties, knew each other well, had much in common. In this new epoch contacts become fleeting and shallow or even formal in nature – e.g. administrative. Despite urban crowding, people felt lonely in the presence of others (Kłoskowska, 1980, 119-120).

In the words of K. T. Toeplitz: "The formation of these new, qualitative and anonymous interpersonal relations is perhaps the greatest blow that history could have dealt man" (Toeplitz, 1981, 38).

The work routine also changed. Most people were condemned to a long and monotonous execution of the same activities in difficult conditions. A phenomenon called *work alienation* was observed. It pertained to separating the effects of work from the workers themselves (Olszewska-Dyoniziak, 1998, 147.). This led to passiveness and a lack of intellectual effort. Tired and burned out people became easy targets for salesmen of trivial and simple products.

There could be no mass culture without the development of a mass means of communication. Tomasz Goban-Klas called the 20th century, due to the development of the cinema, radio and television, the "period of media and communication" (Goban-Klas, 2005, 10). Currently a unique role is played by the internet.

The year 2001 changed the face of the internet. Until this time users mainly received online content. The beginning of the 21st century changed this. Blogs and social networking services were popularized, as well as online stores; users could now express their opinions concerning products, etc. This new reality was called the Web 2.0. Users could now become "creators" and active co-participants. Large social networks were formed (http://technologie.gazeta.pl/internet/1).

The scale of this new phenomenon can be illustrated by the fact that Facebook, a social networking service, had over 600 million users at the beginning of 2011 (http://www.socialbakers.com/blog/). Websites such as MySpace or YouTube allow users to publish their own creative content for an unlimited and culturally divergent potential group of viewers. Mass culture received yet another tool to popularize its content on a previously unheard of scale.

Based on the aforementioned aspects of the origins and development of mass culture we see that it was possible due to the urbanization process, the industrial revolution and the development of mass communication.

Criticism of mass culture

From the very beginning, mass culture has caused many controversies. Umberto Eco conducted an interesting classification of standpoints concerning this phenomenon. He called critics who saw only the negative consequences of mass culture the "apocalyptics". The use of this term was due to the argument that mass culture was leading to the "demise of culture". Supporters were called "integrators". These people accepted the new phenomenon or were even fascinated by it. An illustration of the "Apocalypse" according to Eco can be found in his work on mass culture, while examples of integration stems from an analysis of the content generated by the culture (Eco, 2010, 27).

U. Eco collected the arguments against mass culture, as voiced by various critics. Among the most important are:

- Standardization of content. Means of mass communication target a diversified public and must adjust to "average tastes". Original and innovative solutions are overlooked.

- Commercialization of art. Culture is governed by the rules of the market. Artistic content is overlooked due to the desire to obtain maximum profit. Only content expected by the public is produced. Additional needs are stimulated by commercials.

- Trivialization of the products of high culture (Kłoskowska, 1980, 320.). This content is distributed by the mass media in a "flattened" manner, so as not to force the viewer into making an effort. An equal sign is placed between the products of high culture and entertainment-related products. The concert of a pop music star can be assessed as an event of equal rank as an opera.

- The promotion of passive attitudes towards content. The products of mass culture should be constructed in a way that does not engage our attention. People are not encouraged to gain new experiences. Only maintaining the status quo is encouraged.

- The deadening of historical consciousness. The mass media offer a huge amount of daily information concerning contemporary events, due to which we are aware only of the present. Historical consciousness is beginning to fade (Eco, 2010, 70-73.).

The above list should be supplemented by N. Postman's argument that all areas of life have been converted into an "appetizer" of show business, the aim of which is only pleasure. He coined the metaphor: amusing oneself to death (Postman, 2006, 114).

The author directed this severe criticism mainly towards television. Postman stated that the basic function of this broadcast media is entertainment (Postman, 2006, 121.).

The above arguments generated a response on the part of defenders of mass culture. Arguments for can be presented in a simplified manner:

- Mass culture did not take the place of high culture. It popularized culture among the masses, which had previously not had access to it. It is difficult to expect people with relatively little education to view art in the same way as someone well or highly educated. Yet even simplified forms of high art (i.e. painting reproductions) provide esthetic models for people who do not normally have contact with the products of high culture.

- Man has always had the need for simple entertainment. It is unfair to blame mass culture for the fall of high culture. People have not always spent their leisure time in a productive ways. As an example, boxing matches on TV can be compared to ancient gladiator fights.

- The standardization of content and the unification of tastes eradicates social differences. Thanks to simplification the content is more easily understood. This prevents "cultural exile" in backward social layers (Eco, 2010, 76-83.)

The term *mass culture* was probably used for the first time by D. MacDonald in his article *A Theory of Popular Culture*, in 1944. MacDonald is one of the greatest critics of the mass culture (Kłoskowska, 1980, 263.) MacDonald was very conservative and believed that art should be left to the elite; the remainder of society, according to the author, should maintain their old habits (Strinati, 1998, 23-24). We see here two conflicting perceptions of culture. They contain the center of the conflict between mass culture and high culture.

The distinction between high culture and mass culture is clearly evaluative and seems to be currently out of date and oversimplified. High culture is prescribed by such traits as elitism and activeness of recipients. Its creations are the result of creative and original work of artists. Here we can speak of work with permanent value. It affects the mind of its viewers and is linked with the sphere of the sacrum. Its educational aspect is also significant.

Based on contrasts we can formulate the features of mass culture. Its creations are fleeting and only of entertainment value. These products are designed with the maximum group of passive recipients in mind. Mass culture is said to be schematic. It affects the emotional sphere (Jakubowski, 2006, 23-25).

The distinction between high culture and mass culture is also invalid due to the problematic nature of classifying artwork into one of the two categories. It is difficult to ascertain criteria. Operating based on fixed standards might not lead to desirable results, as certain forms of art, thought to be "low", are actually included in the high culture category. An example is jazz music, once thought to be entertainment for the lower social layers. Currently it is considered elite music

with great artistic content. It is impossible to determine what will advance into the category of high art in the future.

In many ways mass culture is the people's antithesis. Previously local artists or craftsmen worked for people they knew personally, and were somehow connected with. The main objective of creativity was the desire to express one's own emotions. Folk art was strictly linked with the place it was created. Social determinants played an important role. All this caused art to be more diversified and individual in nature than are the products of mass culture. The global nature of mass products caused their content to become unified and adjusted to the suit the needs of diverse societies, often with nothing in common. Industrial products, manufactured for profit, replaced sincere emotions (Kłoskowska, 1980, 360-361.).

A comparison of these cultures is not completely correct. It is rather a mental abbreviation. For the most part it is due to the idealization of traditional culture. Folk elements are often incorporated into mass productions. They can be very successful (e.g. the work of Kapela ze Wsi Warszawa (Band from the Village Warsaw), which received many awards), or be the source of inspiration (e.g. songs by the band De Press, or the popular band Brathanki) for contemporary artists.

An introduction to popular culture

The term *mass culture* is often used as a synonym – both in everyday speech and in academic writing – for *popular culture.* Both terms have a lot in common. We must, however, be aware of the fact that these terms are not interchangeable.

An outline of the relationship between mass culture and popular culture poses many definition-related difficulties. Marian Golka says: "these terms (…) have a lot in common, but there are also many differences. Their meanings partially overlap, and are partially different. Their common denominator is a large number of recipients" (Golka, 2008, 146.). Golka then describes the differences, pertaining mainly to the different means of the diffusion of these phenomena; popular culture was spread also via direct contact, and not only via technical means. Additionally pop culture features feedback – a participant of a festival can become its broadcaster. Mass culture is linked with unified content which was designed to reach as many recipients as possible. Popular culture is currently diversified, and often pertains to niche content without chances of reaching a broad audience.

Marek Krajweski perceives mass culture as a phase of the development of popular culture. He additionally maintains that this phase was completed along with the "contemporary phenomenon of de-massing (Krajewski, 2005, 18) .Currently content is also targeted at smaller groups.

Dominic Strinati has a different approach to these terms. The author stated that "mass culture is popular culture created by mass industry techniques and sold for the profit of the mass public" (Strinati, 1998, 22.). Here the elements of both cultures are identical. The only difference is means of transmission. An example is concerts which do not require personal attendance. Yet the release of such performances on DVDs causes them to become a part of mass culture.

John Fiske described popular culture as the process of generating meaning inside a given social system. He wrote about an active process, dependent, for the most part, on its recipients. Fiske believed that for a product to become a part of popular culture it must be appealing and satisfy interests. Despite commercialization he wrote: "However industrialized culture may be, it will never be fitting to describe it in terms of the sales and purchases of products" (Fiske, 2010, 23).

There are also opinions that the term *popular culture* denotes "mass culture with a plus sign". Here we see a pejorative approach to the second term. It has been noticed that pop culture enables individuals to choose the contents they deem as interesting, and do not have to uncritically accept imposed products, oriented on profit (Olszewska-Dyoniziak, 1998, 155). We can actively participate in popular culture. We are not limited to passive reception.

D. Scheck places the products of pop culture between: "works of art in a gallery (…) and a street stand with corn". In his definition he strives to emphasize both the broad nature of the term, and its diversity. Scheck believes that pop culture, despite its naiveté, is not primitive. He also believes that high culture derives inspiration from the standards imposed by pop culture (Scheck, 1997, 5-6.).

According to M. Krajewski, the problem with defining mass culture is due to the fact that the phenomenon is both very broad and universal. It cannot be effectively put into words. Furthermore, the phenomenon is relatively new. It is thus difficult to "take a step back" and objectively describe it. A further problem is the phenomenon's dynamics. Pop culture has been termed by Krajewski as: "undoubtedly the most dynamic type of culture". It is thus difficult to indicate its limitations. A researcher will never get its whole picture; we can merely draw its outline. It is also difficult to state whether popular culture can be separated from other cultures and whether it is possible to indicate features which characterize solely popular culture. The last issue discussed by the theory of mass culture is that the phenomenon is mainly evaluated – no attempts are made to understand it (Krajewski, 2005, 15-16.).

The weakness of disciplines which analyze popular culture is portrayed by the words of M. Krajewski: "pop culture cannot be described or explained unequivocally to its recipients, or even analyzed". Krajewski believes that this is due in part to the commercial nature of pop culture. Despite the pejorative attitude towards the pursuit of profit and procurement of material goods, these phenomena prompt processes which alter our lives. It can be said that money is a desultory, random power, which materializes itself in the way individuals spend their free time, in trends and entertainment (Krajewski, 2006, 5).

It is believed that popular culture preceded mass culture. It is linked with the birth of capitalism and mechanisms of the formation of nationalism. Thus some researchers place its origins in the beginning of the 18th century in Europe. Others connect mass culture with its entertainment function and see its origins in popular forms of entertainment in the Roman Empire (e.g. gladiator fights). In this case we can say that pop culture has been with us since the origins of mankind (Strinati, 1998, 15).

Popular culture is sometimes criticized as the tool of Americanization. Americanization can be defined as imposing American behavioral patterns on other cultures. This is due to the fact that a large amount of pop culture originates in the USA, mainly in the fields of cinematography and popular music. Yet pop culture takes on many forms, depending on many conditions, and American culture is just one of its many aspects (Nieroba, 2010, 50)

Cultural changes are currently taking place, regardless of our attitude towards them. We can – using the terminology of U. Eco – adjust to them or await the final Apocalypse. Whether we like it or not pop culture and mass culture are all around us. The shape of the future of culture remains a great unknown. We should, however, pay close attention to its transformation.

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