



## Dwight MacDonalDs Theory of Mass Culture: A Comprehensive Overview

(<sup>1</sup>) **Faten Khairy Alrifai** | (<sup>2</sup>) **Layth Safaa Tareq Karmah**

<sup>1,2</sup>College of Education Ibn Rushed for Human Sciences, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq

Email: <sup>1</sup>[faten.khairy@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.iq](mailto:faten.khairy@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.iq), <sup>2</sup>[laith.safaa1203a@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq](mailto:laith.safaa1203a@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq)

Received: November 02, 2024

Reviewed: November 08, 2024

Accepted: November 22, 2024

Published: December 07, 2024

### KEYWORDS

mass culture; high culture; popular culture; avantgardism; Academicism.

### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Dwight Macdonald's "Theory of Mass Culture" by firstly summarising its content; this entails what MacDonald means by mass culture, why he prefers the term "mass" over popular, mass culture about High Culture, why is mass culture different from folk culture and the attempts made to keep mass culture in check Secondly, the current essay also discusses how the term mass culture was defined by other scholars like Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz and Wladyslaw Kopalinski the criticism that has been put forward against this theory in addition to my own thoughts on the matter. Furthermore, it considers the advantages and characteristics of mass culture. And this paper also focuses on the various discussions regarding the development and importance of mass culture. By his own admission, MacDonald rejects any good merits attached to The Mass Culture, stating that the drawbacks are by far more potent than any good that mass culture can bring to the table. The thoughts put forth by MacDonald are compelling, to say the least. Thus, I find myself agreeing with MacDonald in that the future of mass culture looks dismal; however, there is hope that they can coexist.

From the beginning, it is crystal clear that MacDonald prefers the term "Mass" over "Popular" culture, and the reason for that is the term "Popular" indicates the widespread consumption of a cultural product that can be of desirable quality. Furthermore, Mass culture is related to the nature of culture in industrialised societies. Macdonald followed the steps of his period's famous; during that time, traditional social structures in an industrialised society were brought down to spotlight mass culture that brought together a group of distant groups together. (MacDonald,1998, p. 12)

Thus, for Macdonald, Mass culture is the culture of mass society, marked by coarseness, poor taste, sameness in addition to standardisation. Qualities such as these position mass culture in Macdonald's view in contrast to high culture's refined nature and diversity. In his eyes, high culture is being taken over by mass cultures over rising popularity and scalability. (MacDonald, 1998, p. 12)

The reasons for Mass Cultures' historical evolution in the 1800s are almost all have been recognised. The grip of power that the upper-class had on culture was dismantled due to the rise of political democracy and education. Furthermore, companies found considerable profits to be made in creating products; With everything being industrialised, creating cheap merchandise has become possible that is easily consumed by the newly emerging masses". In addition to this, industrialisation made way for new media like movies and TV that are specially formulated for mass culture distribution. Starting out mass culture was a parasite growing off of high culture, and to some, it was considered a continuation of Folk culture. The differences between mass and folk culture are more apparent than the similarities. Folk culture was a spontaneous, indigenous manifestation of the people that they shaped without the help of high culture. On the other hand, "Mass Culture is imposed from above" (MacDonald, 1998, pp.12-13)

The differences between Folk and High cultures are as apparent as the hard lines drawn by the separation of these two classes; however, the rise of political democracy made the water muddled. Folk culture, unlike mass culture, was Unique, while mass culture was at best a vulgarised and cheaply made imitation of high culture. Thus, high culture had to compete with mass culture and could not ignore the imminent threat the mass culture posed. In the United States, this problem is more severe than anywhere else because there are no clear lines that separate the aristocrats from other people (MacDonald, 1998, pp.14-15)

Dwight Macdonald fused an extremist attitude with cultural conservatism and elitism; these two traits reared their head in his 1957 "A Theory of Mass Culture". His essay shows MacDonald's fears that high culture could lose its statutes. Thus, he viewed popular culture as a threat to high culture with its wide distribution of shallow content and widespread popularity. (MacDonald, 1998, pp.15-16)

Up to the 1930s, high culture was on the defensive against mass cultures skyrocketing popularity in two opposite ways: Academicism, which is tasteless for the élite, is an attempt to compete by imitation. This means that it looks like it belongs to high culture, but it does not, and Avantgardism, or a "withdrawal from the competition." which means "poets such as Rimbaud, novelists such as Joyce, composers such as Stravinsky, and painters such as Picasso" refused to compete (MacDonald, 1998, p. 16)

Toeplitz (1981) states that "the term mass culture is one of the most discussed issues of contemporary times". He illustrates that these two terms span over matters from several fields of life, including movies and TV, modern music and fashion. Furthermore, for Toeplitz, mass culture went hand in hand with population growth. (pp.5-6)

Wladyslaw Kopalinski discusses the rise and development of mass culture in the USA during the 1940s. He states that "It is loaded with esthetic, entertainment and intellectual content specific for an urbanised society", which is distributed through mass media (TV, Radio and so on). the content is produced in such a way that it maximises the number of receivers. Thus, it includes little intellectual and aesthetic value with a simplified and dumped down the topic. (Kopaliński and Wiankowska-Ładyka, 1999, p. 217).

Since its inception, mass culture has been surrounded by controversies. Eco (2010) named those who only saw the drawbacks of mass culture as "apocalyptic" because they thought mass culture would result in the "demise of culture" while those who were supportive were called "integrators" for accepting this new phenomenon and even getting excited about it. Thus, an explanation of the "Apocalypse" can be found in his work. Simultaneously, illustrations of integration stem from a breakdown of the content produced by the culture. (p. 27)

U. Eco accumulated the criticisms of mass culture that were put forth by other critics:

Among the first of these was the Standardization of content. This talks about how new techniques were employed in order to be able to distribute these new productions to the masses where different tastes can materialise. Next, we have the Commercialization of art. Market is king, which means that all companies (including independent artists) seek to make the maximum profit; that is why everything produced is based on market demands. Furthermore, there is the deadening of historical consciousness, which refers to how mass media pumps a lot of content concerning the present time, which make people's historical awareness almost nonexistent." Historical" consciousness is beginning to fade" (Eco, 2010, pp. 68-73.).

Kłoskowska (1980) discusses the Trivialization of the products of high culture. This entails that the mediocre products are distributed in a flattened manner to avoid confusing the recipients; however, it is treated in the same way as high-quality products. For example, a comic book about superman can be treated as if it was of the same rank as a novel by James Joyce. (p. 320)

What was discussed above must be enriched by Postman's (2006) claim, which dictates that "all areas of life have been converted into an "appetizer" of show business, the aim of which is only pleasure". Here, postman mainly criticised television Broadcasts whose primary purpose is entertainment and is not concerned with intellectual and aesthetic values (pp. 114, 121).

In line with Macdonald's "The Theory of Mass Culture", it is pretty clear that mass culture pulls an individual apart from his individuality. In addition to shedding light on high mass culture is unavoidable, inevitable and how Technological development and growth are behind it. Furthermore, it is out of the hands of the masses, meaning that the only thing they get a say in is the amount of content they consume. One way in which this can be mitigated is in spreading awareness that the masses don't have to consume every piece of content that enterprises produce. Doing this will bring about the possibility of change and break down the hold of mass culture on one's society. As it was made clear above this essay is about mass culture and high culture and the relationship that ties them together and how they rank on a horizontal spectrum; mass culture is on the low end of the spectrum while high culture is on the high end of it. That is why Macdonald is so vocal about mass culture; he thinks it might cannibalise high culture and wipe out its market share. Macdonald does not want to suppress mass culture. He wants the culture that is being produced and sold to be of the people to the people meaning that it should be born of their creativity and desires, not as a particular commodity that is a soulless husk. In conclusion, MacDonald supports mass culture that is made by the people conveying their emotions and desires and is firmly against a mass culture that is produced by enterprises to be spoon feed to the masses.

All that said, Macdonald acknowledges that mass culture empowers people and gives them feelings of positivity in all its forms. Despite this, it does not offer a decent foundation as a substitute for democratic participation. Thus, as per the above-discussed reasons I agree with MacDonald's point of view that the downsides of mass culture overshadow any possible good it can do because, it threatens art, in general, by streamlining its production. This means that there might be an outflux of high-quality products favouring low-quality ones in the future. This can be seen even nowadays in movies, for example, where most of what is produced is catering to the masses, like superhero movies. For instance, we see more of "Spiderman" and less of "The God Father". However it may be, the rise of mass culture is undeniable. The profits that are there to be had are too hard to ignore by enterprises. Even so, there is still a sort of

balance that can be achieved between the types of content and whom they cater to. High-quality content is almost always discernible from low-quality content; thus, there will always be demand for it even if it is overshadowed by low-quality content.

### References

- Eco, U. (2010). *Apokaliptycy i dostosowani: Komunikacja masowa a teorie kultury masowej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo.
- Kopaliński, W. (1999). *Słownik wydarzeń, pojęć i legend XX wieku*. Wydawn. Nauk. PWN.
- Macdonald, Dwight (1998), 'A theory of mass culture, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2nd and, edited by John Storey, Harlow: Prentice Hall
- Postman, N. (2006). *Zabawić się na śmierć: Dyskurs publiczny w epoce show-biznesu*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo.
- Toeplitz, K. T. (1981). *Wszystko dla wszystkich*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo.