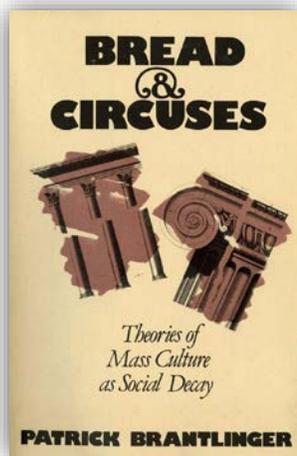


BOOK REVIEW

Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay

By Patrick Brantlinger

Reviewed by Jacob Winn



Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press
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In *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay*, Patrick Brantlinger explores the myriad ways in which so-called “mass culture” is considered in relation to cases of believed social decay. Before looking into the writing in significant detail, it is important to first establish a pair of Brantlinger’s preferred phrases which play significant roles in the work. The phrase “mass culture” is a term Brantlinger uses to describe cultural items which are designed to appeal to the masses at large, such as public spectacles, sports, and the mass media. Its antonym is “high culture,” which describes the elitist, aristocratic approach to culture and centers on that which is by and for those atop the societal hierarchy. With those important definitions in mind, we shall now look toward Brantlinger’s argument .

The overall focus of the argument centers around the common notion that mass culture is either a cause or symptom of cultural decline and decay. As is revealed by the title of the book, the Roman notion of “bread and circuses” as tools to placate the masses is used as a frequent point of reference for typical motifs

of mass culture. However, Brantlinger takes a noticeably skeptical tone toward this age-old notion, implying instead that such a conclusion is a concoction of high cultural elites, with little bearing on reality. By looking at numerous examples from both antiquity and more recent times, Brantlinger showcases a number of thinkers who accept the connection between mass culture and social decay, as well as a number of thinkers who reject such an idea.

Of particular interest to me is Chapter 3 of the book, titled “The Opium of the People,” as it deals specifically with the ways in which religion (with Christianity in particular bearing the brunt of Brantlinger’s critique here) interacts with the paradigm of mass culture and social instability. One of the main streams of thought addressed by Brantlinger in this chapter is the notion that religion is both a form of mass culture and a competitor to secular mass culture. The relationship between religion and high culture is similarly described as complicated, with the Christian religion being compared closely or interchangeably with high culture at points, while also opposed to it in many ways (83). However, despite the ambiguous relationship between Christianity, high culture, and mass culture, the majority of evidence provided in the text points to Christianity as much more a form of mass culture than one of high culture. This is exemplified by the notion that Christianity in the classical world was comprised mostly of society’s undesirables, as the great historian Edward Gibbon was keen to demonstrate (87). There has been a common idea in recent centuries that a widespread secular mass culture will ultimately replace religion, as was most famously the hope of Marx. This notion naturally lends credence to the view that religion is decidedly a form of mass culture, since Marx viewed his ideal mass culture as filling the cultural role of religion, which would then become obsolete in Marx’s ideal society.

Brantlinger identifies one more view of Christianity and culture, which goes beyond the mass culture / high culture dichotomy. This view was especially propagated by a group of existentialists, most notably Kierkegaard, and it espoused a hyper-individualistic view of the

Christian life that holds a certain disdain for the crowd, yet no particular love for the high culture aristocracy either (106). Kierkegaard centered the Christian life on the individual, and placed the individual over and against mass culture which the individual must seek to rise above.

Personally, I consider the dynamic between Christianity and culture to be a complicated matter. While there is certainly truth to the notion that the Christian religion has many of the hallmarks of a form of mass culture, I believe there is also a certain degree of merit to the beliefs of Kierkegaard. While our faith caters to the masses, in that it should appeal to the downtrodden and needy and is thus not a high culture in the classical sense, there is also a grave danger in allowing the faith to be somehow subjected to the whims of the crowd. There is something to be said for noting how a mass culture belongs to the masses in the sense that it is subjected to them by their possession of it. I believe this conundrum ultimately reduces down to the dual nature of our Christian faith, in that it is both significantly communal and deeply personal. Because of this, we are forever separated from full inclusion in any one of the camps that Brantlinger describes. Instead, we must seek to find a place of balance from which to offer a hand of compassion to the masses, while nonetheless acknowledging the importance of the individual and each person's role in their own faith journey. Regarding our role in the grand flow of cultural decline and decay, we must not be swayed by fears over whether or not our culture is declining around us. Instead we must focus on fulfilling our callings, both individually and collectively, to the best of our ability.



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