

D67. "Plumbing the Depths--er, Shallows--of American Mass Culture," The Washington Post Book World, (September 21, 1999), p. C3. (Michael Kammen, American Culture: Social Change and the 20th Century.)

Are our tastes waning, or are we experiencing a vast democratization of high culture, given that masses are flocking to museums, classical music sales are booming, chamber music quartets are springing up all over? Is the nostalgia for some golden age of more rarefied culture merely a form of snobbery? And what role does violent and vile culture play in causing mayhem in our streets, offices and homes?

Before I can report on what Michael Kammen, a highly regarded historian, has concluded, I must explain how he conducted this very learned study. Kammen has written a book that seeks to satisfy even his strictest colleagues. He hence spends an inordinate amount of time clarifying terms, for instance the difference between popular culture (which we always had) and mass culture (of which we produce ever more). He shows that differentiating among tastes as lowbrow, middlebrow and highbrow is not acceptable; indeed, there may be a fourth grade (middle-high?). He points out that whatever you might say about this complex subject holds for some decades but not others. Kammen also is careful never to put his foot down; every statement is qualified, in the best tradition of scholarship.

I hope that by now your expectations are--how should I say it?--properly hedged. Kammen first of all concludes that during the past 50 years the differences between high and mass culture have blurred. Sophisticated people watch Jerry Springer. Less refined people occasionally enjoy something like "Shakespeare in Love." Above all, a fair number of cultural activities are "beyond category," neither highbrow nor lowbrow--watching the 1969 moon walk, for instance. Moreover, differences in cultural tastes no longer correspond "very clearly" with differences in class and education.

Kammen is unusually sharp when he notes that in the past half century--especially in the last generation, although less so over the very last decade--cultural authorities have lost much of their sway and cultural powers have taken over. Once critics were legitimate arbitrators of taste; they had much control over what was considered valuable and what was considered junk. Now corporations shape our culture. They use their marketing power to homogenize the market because the less segmented it is, the higher their profits are. As a result, he writes, "an excess of mediocracy is allowed to flourish."

Here I wished to learn more. Kammen allows as an aside that the mass-culture producers at first resisted marketing rock-and-roll music but then, driven by young people's demands, pushed it. Does this mean that the corporate tycoons have some notions of what they ought not to sell? And are there some limits on the extent to which they can brainwash us?

Kammen is most interesting when he studies the rise of passivity (the couch-potato culture) and democratization (the inclusion of the masses in culture). He finds that although for quite a stretch we have been mere customers of prefabricated culture, recent developments modify this trend: Interactive television, call-in shows, remote controls and computers all provide for a somewhat higher level of participation. Moreover, it is hard to find fault with culture now being a pursuit for the many rather than for a privileged few.

While there is little here that is new for the general reader, I strongly recommend "American Culture, American Tastes" to anyone who wishes to seriously study culture. Such a reader will find ample scholarship here.

Both academic and other readers will note that the book is written as if Bill Bennett had never burst upon the scene. It has next to nothing to say about the cultural question of the age: Does our mass culture make us ever more violent and less moral? I would have happily traded Kammen's detailed account of how he differs from some other historians for an examination of the effects of mass culture on our national character.

"Lower" tastes do not necessarily mean a morally debased society. If millions of young Americans read Harlequin's silly love novelettes, it may spoil their appreciation of Balzac (or it could whet their appetites for serious novels--at least they are reading). Such reading, though, will not make them gun down their fellow human beings. Which cultural products are harmful to our character rather than merely to our tastes, and what might be done to curb them, are subjects to which I hope Kammen will turn next.

Amitai Etzioni, who teaches at George Washington University and is the author, most recently, of "The Limits of Privacy."