

**ARTS & LETTERS***Lowbrow Art*

"Mass Culture Reconsidered" by Christopher Lasch, in *democracy* (Oct. 1981), 43 West 61st St., New York, N.Y. 10023.

Mass culture, from network television to potboiler novels, has thrown the American Left into a quandary. It seems to reflect popular tastes and therefore to qualify as "democratic" and praiseworthy. Yet even the most populist thinkers regard much of it as aesthetically dreadful, intellectually stultifying, and politically retrograde.

Lasch, a University of Rochester historian, argues that Marxists and liberal sociologists share a view of popular culture that reveals a great blind spot in their political thinking—they equate progress and modernity with "uprootedness."

Like their 18th-century predecessors, they hold that the emergence of a truly classless or democratic society hinges on a weakening of allegiances to family, race, religion, and land. They generally explain popular culture's shortcomings with tortured rationalizations. Some, such as critic Dwight Macdonald, dismiss even the possibility of high-quality mass culture. "The great cultures of the past have all been elite affairs," and always will be, Macdonald maintains. Others, including sociologist Herbert Gans, suggest that taste is relative and citizens are entitled to lowbrow culture if it relieves their boredom.

The Left today is quick to argue that modern industrialism and the "mass market" have resulted in shoddy goods and a freedom of choice that is limited to "the freedom to choose more or less indistinguishable commodities." At the same time, leftist ideologues fail to appreciate that culture, as it has become something for general consumption, has come under the same influences; the consumer of culture is no more "sovereign" in front of the TV than in the shopping plaza.

In both politics and art, progress has always been fortified by a sense of past and place, Lasch contends. The assimilating forces of which mass culture is a part do not destroy the "need for roots." But they may push people toward substitutes—e.g., "aggressive nationalism"—that are often the antitheses of everything true democrats believe in.

**OTHER NATIONS***Chile's Transition*

"Chile: Market Fascism or Utopian Libertarianism?" by Paul E. Sigmund, in *Worldview* (Oct. 1981) P.O. Box 1024, Denville, N.J. 07834.

Since the 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende's Marxist regime, Chile has been variously criticized by Western liberals for its repressive military junta, its economic "market fascism," and, more recently, the occasional exiling of leftist foes.