



All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture

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Where did popular culture come from? Why is it the way it is? How does it influence Americans in general and Christians in particular? Ken Myers provides fascinating answers to these questions. He sees pop culture as a culture of diversion, preventing people from asking questions about their origin and destiny and about the meaning of life. Two aspects stand out--a quest for novelty and a desire for instant gratification. In addition, this culture offers something very appealing--the illusion that you set your own standards, you can choose, you are the master of your fate, you deserve a break, you're worth it.

All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture Details

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From Reader Review All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture for online ebook

Brian Collins says

This book could be summed up in this phrase: Christians must evaluate culture not only by its content but also by the sensibilities that it fosters. Though simply stated, this is a profound insight. It changes the question that Christians should be asking about their daily activities. The question is not merely, “is this permissible?” but “is this good and wise?” Watching a television show is permissible. But is watching one or two every night wise? What sensibilities are fostered by that habit? What sensibilities should a Christian be fostering?

Myers suggests that pop culture promotes the sensibilities of novelty (as opposed to tradition), immediacy (as opposed to patience and learning), diversion (as opposed to meditation), celebrity (as opposed to community), and youth (as opposed to respect for the wisdom of the aged). It opposes inhibiting the “authentic self” (in contrast to controlling passions and developing virtues). By appealing to the masses, pop culture tends to be intellectually shallow. It also tends to avoid religious themes. What I find striking about his observations is that in every case the sensibilities of Christianity ought to be precisely the opposite.

Myers is not saying that Christians can never consume pop culture. He uses the analogy of a Whopper. Having an occasional Whopper is fine. But a diet of Whoppers is not fine. It is bound to both distort your taste and to harm your health. The upshot of this is that Christians cannot make cultural decisions based on proof-texts. They must instead develop wisdom.

This is a must read book, in my opinion.

Dan Montgomery says

On the fence between 2 and 3 stars. There are a number of high points, but it has some real valleys too. The 2012 introduction is rich (mostly because of its Peter Leithart quotes). His basic premise that pop culture is based on immediacy and therefore is inherently stifling to deep Christian growth needs to be heard. Unfortunately, he needs a new editor. The flow of the book didn’t work. Some minor points received major attention and the main point often got buried.

Also, the High/Folk/Pop culture divide was assumed to be too absolute and couldn’t hold everything he wanted it to hold. I personally see more potential virtue in both pop culture and Romanticism than Myers. However, many of his concerns have only become MORE valid in the decades since this was written.

Want to reflect theologically about culture? Listen to Ken Myers “Mars Hill Audio Journal” instead. It’s worth the money. You get all the insights he shared here, only it’s seasoned with much more wisdom and given a better focus.

Megan Lane says

If I was rating on mere enjoyment of the book, it would be two stars. However, I have to give credit for it being thought-provoking and generally pushing me to want to make better choices in my listening, watching, and reading. Although, taking that out of it instead of being annoyed by it took a conscious effort.

If that makes sense.

Anyway, I can't say I recommend it, but I do appreciate the heart of it. Read, watch, and listen to things that will bring you closer to God and the person He's called you to be.

Corey says

Upon a second read through, my suspicions have been confirmed: Ken Myers is one of my heroes.

Mary says

Ken Myers encourages us to find other forms of entertainment and cultural habits besides our daily diet of "immediate gratification" (also called pop culture). This book helped me understand what popular culture is, how it came about, and why I don't want to be steeped nor have my children steeped in it. I particularly liked the comparison between high culture, traditional culture and popular culture. Mr. Myers is an intellectual, and there are some passages that require some heavy thinking, but he is witty and wise, and it is a read that is both educational and enjoyable. I would recommend this book to anyone living in today's society.

Joel Arnold says

All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes (1989) is another evangelical cultural critique somewhat along the lines of Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns or The Closing of the American Mind. Kenneth Myers laments the church's lost influence within the culture as well as the broader disintegration of morals and intellectual depth in American culture. He attributes this to two major factors: rock music and television. His argument essentially runs:

- Our culture is headed downward and Christians have just accepted / accommodated wholesale, subscribing to cultural relativism. What happened?
- There is a critical distinction between high and low culture. The former deepens us, makes us think, and changes us. The latter just entertains / distracts and leaves us essentially where we started. We are changed and engaged by high culture but just "use" low culture.
- Because of negative cultural trends in romanticism and modernism, high culture collapsed in the '60s and pop culture became the new norm that we all mindlessly consume.
- This is clearly evident in television where thoughtlessness predominates and in rock, characterized by rebellion and angst.

As one might expect, Myers relies heavily on the mantra that "the medium is the message. Actually, the penultimate sentence of the book is "leaders need to become more sensitive to the way forms communicate values." His application of that, of course, is to television (essentially Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death). This is one of the ironies of the book, as the analysis of technology is completely out of date. (That isn't his fault—every discussion of technology will be out of date in a few years. But when the analysis runs that technology took away our analytical skills because television is image based rather than text based, it's

hard not to think that the internet restored some of that. You are, after all, reading this review and doing it on a site called "Goodreads.") All in all, Myers is far more responsible with his arguments in this vein than Challies or Postman.

I happen to agree that the church has a problem with the television we watch and with the music we allow. I just don't think Myers posited the greatest arguments on either point, and I doubt that someone who disagrees with me would be convinced by Myers any more than they would be convinced by me anyway.

The most interesting chapter was the last. After all of his denunciations, Myers concludes by saying that we can enjoy popular culture as much as we want "as long as you are not dominated by the sensibility of popular culture, as long as you are not captivated by its idols" (180). Ironically, he blasts away on culture for 178 pages in a way that strikes me as carrying a few too many non-sequiturs and then concludes by being more open to pop culture than I'm comfortable with. I've had a similar experience in other media ecology books.

My suspicion is that we all agree that there is a cultural crisis and that the American church is slipping into deep accommodationism or even syncretism. Media ecologists then proceed to blame the issue on the medium, our culture's love of images, or on technology. People like me are tempted to eat it up because we're so glad to finally see someone critique the culture. But while it seems promising, the analysis is flawed and the conclusion is therefore also skewed. The real problem is actually quite basic. It's not the medium at all. It's the content. The American church needs to stop tolerating sin in their lives, their choices, their families. If a movie doesn't belong in our homes, we can't blame televisions. Throw away the movie. Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman aren't the answer. We need Matt. 5:13-16; 6:19-20; Eph. 5:3-21 and a whole host of other Scriptures.

Interesting quotes:

131—acknowledges that popular art also took up the mantra "the medium is the message."

160—"television is thus not simply the dominant medium of popular culture, it is the single most significant shared reality in our entire society." Pretty sure that's the internet now.

161—a little shocking: "Because of the way television works, if the content of every television program was consistent with a Christian worldview, but television was still as pervasive as it is today, I believe it would still pose serious problems for Christians."

171—Strong media ecology statement: "Even if all of the entertainment on television was inoffensive to Christian ethics and of the highest artistic merit, its form of communication (and form of knowing) encourages the aversion to abstraction, analysis, and reflection that characterizes our culture at all levels... Thinking is often hard work. Television's surfeit of instant entertainment not only provides relief from such hard work; it offers an attractive, alternative 'way of knowing' (as does rock 'n' roll) that makes reasoning seem anachronistic, narrow, and unnecessary." Really?

179-180—"Many Christians are interested in the answer to the question, 'How can I enjoy popular culture in a way that is consistent with a Christian worldview?' What if someone were to ask, 'How can I enjoy sexuality in a way that is consistent with a Christian worldview?' It would not be responsible to answer simply by offering a catalogue of sexual behavior and saying, 'These are things you can do, and these are things you can't.' Rather, we should start by understanding sexuality in the context in which God created it, by examining its significance in light of other activities and responsibilities and relationships. A good answer would begin with a question, 'what is the nature of human sexuality.'

Of course, such an answer may not satisfy the impatient adolescent who simply wants to know "how far" he can go without sinning. But the cultivation of a Christian worldview is not a matter of defining the "bottom line." It involves reflecting on the nature of things, on the place they have in the larger scheme of creation

and redemption, in human nature and in history."

Dianne Oliver says

Extremely good information. I only wish I had read this long ago, and now I wish it were updated to help untangle the current situation in social media, internet, gaming, etc. As a child of tv, parent, and victim of the new media in church mentality this book overwhelms one with regret, frankly. I think a look back over the decades to see how pop culture has evolved and the insipid way it affects all aspects of our thinking is wise. It is good to remain aware and to be reminded of the value of putting in the effort to get rewarded by the higher art forms, and of the intrinsic value therein.

Justin Dillehay says

After reading about this book for 15 years, I finally read it. I'm glad I did. I'm also glad I read it when I did. Had I read it when I was younger, I would have dismissed it as elitist. Read it with an open mind.

Nathan says

This book is engaging and exciting to read at first, and then as it goes on I realize how much I have given in to the idols of popular culture. By the end of it I am very wary of my own taste in the cultural artefacts I consume all too quickly without reflecting on what idol I might be worshipping.

I wish I had read this book third years ago. Better late than never, though, right?

Ashley Cobb says

Mr. Myers has written a book in which he espouses a theory that culture (both "high" and "folk") has been subsumed, if not eliminated, by pop culture. He defines "high culture" as that what we would associate with the "upper crust" of society. The great works of art, music, and literature that have survived the test of time. He defines "folk culture" as the material generated by a subset of society to depict and display their way of life. (Think of an Irish jig or bluegrass music or an oral legend). He tries to water it down, but in the end, it feels, at least to me, an attempt to lessen the sting of saying "low culture". High culture is for the upper crust, low culture (he says "folk culture") is for everyone else. This segregation of cultures is implicitly endorsed throughout his book. In so many words, he states that high culture isn't enjoyed by everyone because it takes effort to fully appreciate its greatness. However, according to Myers, whether culture is high or low is irrelevant because it is all be gobbled up by "pop culture".

I have several issues with his argument and how it is presented in the book. Myers seems to ignore and overlook several key issues which, if dealt with honestly, would in ways degrade his thesis. The first comes to what is "high culture". While there are many works of art, music, and literature that are recognized for its greatness immediately (i.e. Michelangelo's David), there are several others that take a while to achieve that greatness (Starry Night by Van Gogh). We hail the works of William Shakespeare today but at the time his

plays were written, he was at odds with the "morality police" of his day.

There are often "periods" used to describe the overall nature of a work created during a specific time period, especially in art and music. For example, Medieval Music gave way to Renaissance which gave way to Baroque, which gave way to Classical and so forth. These periods rarely have a hard start/stop line and there was frequent overlap. A piece of early Baroque music wasn't known as Baroque when it was written. People knew it wasn't Renaissance. Only until the Baroque period was more firmly established did the earlier pieces of that period get its due. Who is to say that much of the discordant material being produced today is the start of a new period? I don't know.

I don't think pop culture "consumed" high/folk culture. I think pop culture is merely folk culture that found a larger platform. 400 years ago you could go to a tavern somewhere in England and hear bar songs being sung. You could then go to Germany, or Italy, or Russia, or China or anywhere else and you would find places that served alcohol and boisterous songs being sung by its patrons. These songs would fall under what Myers would call "folk culture" and one could surmise that these songs were probably very different in form, sound, and lyrics. A big reason why is the world was a much bigger place and it would be hard for a song, popular in an English tavern to make its way to a tavern in Italy. Radio changed that, television exploded that, and the Internet (which didn't even exist when Myers wrote the book) took things to a whole new level. "Folk Culture" historically enjoyed a broad appeal that had a limited geographical influence. Modern media allows the appeal to flow from one end of the globe to the next.

An artist needs a patron. If an artist wants to get paid for his work, he must find someone willing to pay him for his work. Vergil wrote "the Aeneid" for Augustus Caesar, Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel for the Pope, Bach composed the Brandenburg concertos for a German nobleman. You want to get paid, then you do something for your patron and you make sure they like it. You might hide a clever dig in the work (Vergil did with the Aeneid, Michelangelo had a few surprises in the Sistine Chapel) but overall you make sure your patron is happy with your work. The same is true today. One of the great composers of our time is John Williams, he writes great music for movie soundtracks because that is where the money is. His work is "high culture" in my esteem and I predict it will be known a 100 years from now. However, pop culture (which is in my opinion folk culture on a larger scale) has access to funding albeit in a different form. You make the music, if people like it, you get to make more, if they don't, you won't. How many "one hit wonders" have there been? Too many to count. Now, with the advent of iTunes and YouTube, you don't even need a record label to get your music out. If it is good, it can "go viral". How much of this will stand the test of time? That is hard to say for a moment.

Myers engages in a lot of "doom and gloom" about the demise of culture and specifically Christian influence on the culture. The book is very negative and frankly depressing. He laments for 10 chapters over the demise of culture. He tries to perk things up a bit in the 11th chapter but it is too little too late. He has already made his point, culture is doomed, we just need to bunker down. This is all the more interesting given that he wrote the book nearly 30 years ago. Ironic in that many of his chapter titles and most of the sub-chapter titles include pop culture references that many of our students today wouldn't get. He does try to "modernize" it a bit with an introduction that was updated in 2012 but even that is dated now. Social Media is far more pervasive than it was even just a half a decade ago. He has some good points but I think he misses the boat with how "folk culture" evolved into pop culture.

Becky says

2.5 stars. Probably because my mind has been desensitized by culture to just appreciate entertainment and things that are not deep. :) :p
But this book was deep and, well, boring.

Peter N. says

This book was very different from what I expected. The pragmatist that I am, I expected an practical dissection of popular culture. Instead what I got was a more philosophical exploration of the origins and effects of popular culture. Of course, the book is dated in it's illustrations. References to Miami Vice, Alf, and the Ramones are in the book. But the central ideas are not dated.

Several items of note: His chapter on the restlessness of pop culture was excellent and even more timely now than it was then. We are a nervous, restless, untethered society. Why is this the case and how does that effect our discipleship? Second, his critique of the effect of rock music (by this he means all popular music, not just AC/DC) on the church was spot on. The church has become "entrepreneurs of emotional stimulation." And his point that television has become what defines reality was excellent. Except now we all get to choose what reality to live in via the Internet. I can live in my Fox News reality or my MSNBC reality or my ESPN reality or... So yes my reality is often defined by what I watch, but unlike in 1989 there are numerous realities to choose from.

I would recommend the book, but it was more difficult to read than I anticipated.

Chaim says

The best, most interesting parts are basically paraphrases of CS Lewis' "An Experiment in Criticism." I'd recommend just reading "An Experiment in Criticism," which is an easy-to-read and inspiring book.

Chris Griffith says

Although originally published in 1989 before the days of Email, Facebook, YouTube, etc. the principles found in this well-written book are still just as relevant today as they were 25, 30, or even 50 years ago. Myers taught me an important lesson in this book and he learned in from C.S. Lewis' An Experiment in Criticism. There are two different ways to approach art, 1. as a user. 2. as a receiver. "Users" are mindless consumers and use art to amuse themselves. In other words, it is background chatter and confirms to them that which they already know. Art doesn't challenge a "User" as much as it feeds his ego and love of self. "Receivers" are changed by the art they encounter. Popular art tends to fit the mold of the former category and often and regrettably so, I've found myself there. High culture art falls into the latter and requires active engagement with mind and sensory perception.

John says

This is the best and most practical book on Christianity and culture that I've read. Myers takes a practical,

biblically informed perspective on culture--particularly popular culture. He differentiates high culture, folk culture, and popular culture and argues that Christians may partake in pop culture provided "you are not dominated by the sensibility of popular culture, as long as you are not captivated by its idols." To me this seems like a sensible and wise pronouncement.

He also adds Paul's argument that all things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. He argues that Christians are called to a high standard regarding how they interact with culture. This is a great book and should receive a much greater audience.
