

Middlebrow

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The term **middlebrow** describes both a certain type of easily accessible art, often literature, as well as the population that uses art to acquire culture and class that is usually unattainable. First used by the British satire magazine *Punch* in 1925, middlebrow is derived as the intermediary between highbrow and lowbrow, terms derived from phrenology.^[1] Middlebrow has famously gained notoriety from derisive attacks by Dwight Macdonald, Virginia Woolf, and to a certain extent, Russell Lynes. It has been classified as a forced and ineffective attempt at cultural and intellectual achievement, as well as characterizing literature that emphasizes emotional and sentimental connections rather than literary quality and innovation.^[2]

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Virginia Woolf on middlebrow

Virginia Woolf explicitly articulated her derision of *the middlebrow* in an un-posted letter-to-the-editor of the *New Statesman* about a review of a book of hers that omitted the word *highbrow*. That letter was posthumously published in the essay collection *The Death of the Moth* in 1942.^{[3][4]}

Virginia Woolf distinguishes middlebrows as petty purveyors of highbrow cultures for their own shallow benefit. Rather than selecting books for their intrinsic value, middlebrows select and read what they are told is best. Middlebrows are concerned with *how* what they do makes them appear, unlike highbrows, the avant-garde men and women who act according to their indelible commitment to beauty, value, art, form, and integrity. Woolf said, “We highbrows read what we like and do what we like and praise what we like”. Likewise, a lowbrow is devoted to a singular interest, a person “of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life”; and, therefore, are equally worthy of reverence, as they, too, are living for what they intrinsically know as valuable.

Middlebrows, instead, are “betwixt and between”, which Woolf classifies as “in pursuit of no single object, neither Art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige”. Their value system rewards quick gains through literature already designated as ‘Classic’ and ‘Great’, never of their own choosing, because “to buy living art requires living taste”. The middlebrow are meretricious — which is much less demanding than authenticity.

Russell Lynes: "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow"

Harper's Magazine editor Russell Lynes satirized Virginia Woolf's highbrow scorn in the article "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow".^[5] Quoting her and other highbrow proponents, such as art critic Clement Greenberg, Lynes parodied the highbrow's pompous superiority by noting how the subtle distinctions Woolf found significant among the "brows" were just means of upholding cultural superiority. Specifically, he parodies the highbrow claim that the products a person uses distinguishes his or her level of cultural worth, by satirically identifying the products that would identify a middlebrow person.

Lynes continued distinguishing among "brows", dividing middlebrow into upper-middlebrow and lower-middlebrow. The upper-middlebrow's arts patronage makes highbrow activity possible. Museums, orchestras, operas, and publishing houses are run by upper-middlebrows. The lower middlebrows attempt using the arts for self-enhancement: "hell-bent on improving their minds as well as their fortunes". They also intend to live the simple, easy life outlined in advertisements; "lower middlebrow-ism" was "a world that smells of soap". Caricaturing Woolf, Lynes outlined the perfect world without middlebrows; lowbrows work and highbrows create pure art.

Months later, Life magazine asked Lynes to specifically distinguish among the right foods, furniture, clothes, and arts for each of the four 'brows'. That began national preoccupation, as people tried to identify their proper social class, based upon their favorite things. Although *middlebrow* often has connoted contempt, Lynes lauded the zeal and aspirations of the middlebrows.^[6]

Dwight Macdonald: "Masscult and Midcult"

Dwight Macdonald's critique of middlebrow culture, "Masscult and Midcult" (1960), associated the modern industrial drive away from specialization and folk as creating mass-market and therefore anonymous consumers of the arts.^[7] Highbrow culture, to Macdonald, is associated with specialization for the connoisseurs, while lowbrow culture entails folk products made authentically for specific communities. Mass culture, or masscult, copies and manipulates both these traditions, with factory creations made without innovation or care expressly for the market "pleas[ing] the crowd by any means." This creates an America in which "a pluralistic culture cannot exist," where homogeneity rules.

Midcult, contrastingly, came about with middlebrow culture and dangerously copies and adulterates high culture, spreading "a tepid ooze of Midcult," which threatens high culture. He indicts, among others, *Our Town*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and American collegiate gothic architecture.

Macdonald writes "[The Middlebrow] pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them." He promoted a separation between the 'brows' so that "the few who care about good writing, painting, music, architecture, philosophy, etc. have their High Culture, and don't fuzz up the distinction with the Midcult."^[8]

Marketed middlebrow

The Book-of-the-Month Club and Oprah Winfrey's Book Club have been widely characterized as middlebrow,^[9] marketed to bring classics and 'highbrow' literature to the middle class. This was particularly highlighted when author Jonathan Franzen, after his book *The Corrections* was selected, remarked in several publications that some of Oprah's book club picks were middlebrow.^[10] Janice Radway in her seminal account of the Book-of-the-Month Club (as it was from its inception in 1926 to the 1980s before it transformed to a purely commercial operation) *A Feeling for Books*, argues that middlebrow culture is not simply a diluted impersonation of highbrow, but instead distinctly defined itself in defiance of avant-garde high culture.^[11] The club provided subscribers with literature selected by expert and 'generalist' judges, but held the personal, emotional experience of reading a good book as paramount, while simultaneously maintaining 'high standards' for literary quality. In this way, the club was in opposition to the general criticism of middlebrow culture in that it is forced high culture. Instead, Radway demonstrates that the middlebrow culture allows readers to simultaneously access the emotional and intellectual challenges that good reading provides. Radway also identifies the conflicting gender messages sent by the selections. While the club was marketed extensively to the female reader, including its emphasis on the emotional pleasure of books, the focus on intellectual, academic literature of the middlebrow trapped the reader into the constrictive masculine standards of value, classifying 'great books' as those that fell in line with male, technical classifications of excellence.

Contemporary middlebrow

Slate Magazine suggests that the late 2000s and early 2010s could potentially be considered the "golden age of middlebrow art" —pointing to television shows *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* and novels *Freedom*, *The Marriage Plot* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. *Slate* also defines the films of Aaron Sorkin as middlebrow.^[12] Some argue that *Slate* itself is middlebrow journalism.^[13]

In a March 2012 article for *Jewish Ideas Daily*, Peodair Leihy described the work of poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen as "a kind of pop—upper-middle-brow to lower-high-brow, to be sure, but pop nonetheless."^[14] This aesthetic was further theorized in an essay from November that year for *The American Scholar* that saw William Deresiewicz propose the addition of "upper middle brow," a culture falling between masscult and midcult. He defined it as, "infinitely subtler than Midcult. It is post- rather than pre-ironic, its sentimentality hidden by a veil of cool. It is edgy, clever, knowing, stylish, and formally inventive."^[15]

In *The New Yorker*, Macy Halford characterizes Harper's Magazine and *The New Yorker* as "often [being] viewed as prime examples of the middlebrow: both magazines are devoted to the high but also to making it accessible to many; to bringing ideas that might remain trapped in ivory towers and academic books, or in high-art (or film or theatre) scenes, into the pages of a relatively inexpensive periodical that can be bought at bookstores and newsstands across the country (and now on the Internet)." She also notes the internet's effect on the middlebrow debate: "Internet is forcing us to rethink (again) what "middlebrow" means: in an era when the highest is as accessible as the lowest—accessible in the sense that both are only a click away ... — we actually have to think anew about how to walk that middle line." Halford describes Wikipedia: "...Wiki is itself a kind of middlebrow product." and links to this middlebrow entry "because it actually provides a smart summary"^[16]

References

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Further reading

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