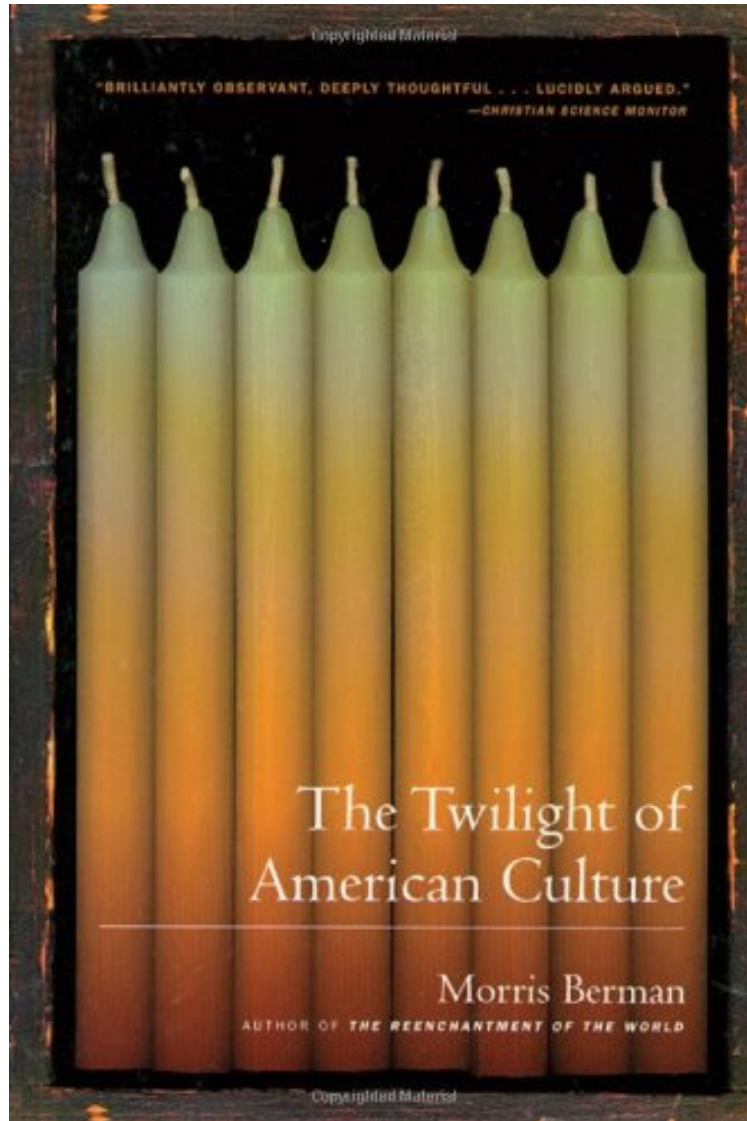


(Free pdf) The Twilight of American Culture

## The Twilight of American Culture

*Morris Berman*

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**Morris Berman : The Twilight of American Culture** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Twilight of American Culture:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Call for a New MonasticismBy Norman A. PattsIf you have a gnawing sense that things aren't what they should be, that the grand rhetoric of American exceptionalism is really little more than bad propaganda, you're not alone. But what do in the face of evident decline, as a superpower, as a culture, as a place of spiritual succor, as, frankly, a civilization? You can start by reading Morris Berman.Berman writes with a

bracing and realistic sobriety about what makes life living. He calls for a new monasticism, a renewal of individual commitments to excellence in word and deed that takes root outside the mainstream of a consumerist/corporate culture celebrating success as though conformity, the ethos of the group, were good. He's the sort of author who makes you feel good about the decision to tune out the white noise of the politics of right/left. The fact as both parties suck; neither has much to offer. Berman is not calling for a retreat to cloisters. Rather, he urges a passionate engagement with good literature, good values, a way of life worth preserving for posterity, even if what the future holds, at least in the near term, is bleak. I found the message persuasive, and realized that for the past decade or so, my wife and I have been doing just that -- we've long since said farewell to the American creed. The best and brightest resort to irony as a way of coping with a moral and intellectual vacuum; the rest simply shop until they drop; the stupid, and there are plenty of them, chant patriotic gore while refusing to confront the reality that class divisions in the United States are sowing the seeds of eventual disruption, even violence. The center no longer fails to hold; it has become a vortex sucking the life out of those who care to look to mainstream for comfort. Indeed, in the past year I've proudly hung an anarchist flag in my office. When clients ask how I, as a lawyer, can hang such a flag, I tell them the answer is simple: I do not believe that the rule of law reflects justice -- it simply reflects a more or less civilized way of responding to conflict. I am a good shepherd trying to keep my clients from harm in a dangerous world, and few things are as dangerous as a naive belief that our laws are anything more than bandaids slapped on a rotting corpse. I only discovered Berman last week. I've spent my free time this week reading through his works. It's like discovering an old friend. No, make that like discovering that the silent voice muttering in the back of your mind that trouble is coming isn't so crazy after all. Read Berman. He's literate, non-polemical, and a steady guide through troubled times. 8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. America the Hustler By Jen Essentially, America is one big hustla and corporatocracy has us in its death grip. Democracy, according to Berman, has come to mean the right to choose between Burger King and McDonald's or Target and Wal-Mart or other equally banal places where one can part from one's money. Furthermore, the sun is setting on the formerly flourishing American empire because our literacy levels and basic cultural and historical knowledge are declining; our youth all want to be celebrities and can barely write coherent sentences or read over a middle school grade level. His evidence for this isn't always what I imagine discerning readers would like, but we've all seen the idiocracy for ourselves in all probability. I want to say this is all alarmist bunk from a crotchety malcontent (after all, who hasn't been crying the end of some culture or another at pretty much every point in history?), and I suppose it is indeed bunk to some --- but only if you're fine with slogans replacing nuanced thinking, buying and branding replacing true choice and self-awareness, and knowledge and education as pure commodities, to be bought and sold like anything else. The problem is that no period in history has had a population full of intellectuals or even literate people. And haven't folks always wanted material goods and to be either aspirational consumers or conspicuous ones? Berman is right, though, to emphasize that the extent corporations have provided bread and circus for the population is now hindering real thought and action, that this "democratizing of desire" has virtually swept the population adrift. All of this allows the wealthy to become even wealthier and virtually purloin the American economy, according to Berman. He convincingly argues that the decadence of the U.S. parallels that of Rome in its decline, but that premise is staid and nothing new, honestly. More interesting is his solution to the demise of an intellectual America: a scattered class of New Monastic Individuals (NMIs) who reject corporate consumerism and business and commercial success to embrace the liberal arts and a life lived away from celebrity culture, malls, and 24 hour news cycles. I like the NMI idea, but I also like activism, and Berman is unwilling to consider that civil disobedience, protest, and alternative news sources, among other things, can begin to awaken people from a corporation and commodities-induced zombie state. (We should not go gentle into that goodnight!) Admittedly, I was fairly appalled by Berman's wholesale dismissal of postmodernism and multiculturalism/political correctness (his rebuttal might be that I can't see past the cultural constructions that I've been subjected to. You see how these rebuttals could go on and on and on...ad infinitum) As with anything, there are ridiculous extremes to these movements, but there are valuable elements to these "-isms" and, in fact, "-isms" can be productive. For example, in Berman's diatribe against them and group identification, he rails against women describing themselves as "feminist", saying that an NMI would call herself an "independent woman", not a feminist. It seems to me that cohesive communities of like-minded people are useful to the political life of a nation as well as the soul of a person, and where I come from (rural KY) I find a fearless identification with what is viewed as subversive and abnormal important (i.e. feminism to those in the bible belt). One can be a critical and independent thinker and still find group identities important and more than simply labels, as long as a dialectic is possible and the groups don't become ideological straightjackets. This book, though, has changed my reading list for the next few years and further inspired me in my thus far pitiable and inadequate attempts to renounce (at least partially) Feudalism 2.0. I am inspired to take bits and pieces of Berman's New Monastic Individual idea and combine that with other philosophies and values I find important. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. You Can't Say You Didn't Know By Moore No Less The Twilight of American Culture is among the best written inconvenient truths about where we are now in the 21st century --- despite the distractions and delusions many engage in today. It's also a current events cautionary tale. Too bad many of us will not connect the dots, let alone even see the dots of our impending cultural and

socioeconomic implosion. Moreover, too bad many of us in our relatively young nation haven't paid enough attention to the errors and warnings of so many older cultures --- especially the extinct ones. The best and least that any of us can do right now is to fully read Morris Berman's book(s). At the very least, when the proverbial s\*\*\* hits the fan, you'll have the right informational and intellectual hazmat gear to cover your ass.

An emerging cult classic about America's cultural meltdown and a surprising solution. A prophetic examination of Western decline, *The Twilight of American Culture* provides one of the most caustic and surprising portraits of American society to date. Whether examining the corruption at the heart of modern politics, the "Rambification" of popular entertainment, or the collapse of our school systems, Morris Berman suspects that there is little we can do as a society to arrest the onset of corporate Mass Mind culture. Citing writers as diverse as de Toqueville and DeLillo, he cogently argues that cultural preservation is a matter of individual conscience, and discusses how classical learning might triumph over political correctness with the rise of a "a new monastic individual" a person who, much like the medieval monk, is willing to retreat from conventional society in order to preserve its literary and historical treasures. "Brilliantly observant, deeply thoughtful ....lucidly argued." *Christian Science Monitor*

.com "If you have finally had it with CNN and Hollywood and John Grisham and New Age 'spirituality,' then pull up a chair, unplug your phone (beeper, TV, fax machine, computer, etc.), and give me a few hours of your time. I promise to do my best not to entertain you." A slightly forbidding introduction to a book, but indicative of its author's disgust at the homogenized McWorld in which we live, and an enticing challenge to read on. As the title *The Twilight of American Culture* suggests, Morris Berman's outlook is somewhat bleak. Analogizing the contemporary United States to the late Roman Empire, Berman sees a nation fat on useless consumption, saturated with corporate ideology, and politically, psychically, and culturally dulled. But he believes that this behemoth--what Thomas Frank called the "multinational entertainment oligopoly"--must buckle under its own weight. His hope for a brighter tomorrow lies in a modern monastic movement, in which keepers of the enlightenment flame resist the constant barrage of "spin and hype." Ironically, despite his disdain for "the fashionable patois of postmodernism," he approvingly quotes poststructuralist theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard's maxim "elitism for everybody" in describing this cadre of idiosyncratic, literate devotees, these new monks. Berman is plainspoken and occasionally caustic. *The Twilight of American Culture* is an informed and thought-provoking book, a wake-up call to a nation whose powerful minority has become increasingly self-satisfied as their stock options ripen, while an underclass that vastly outnumbers the e-generation withers on the vine and cannot locate itself on any map. It is a quick and savage read that aims to get your eyes off this computer, your nose out of that self-help book, and send you back to thought and action. --J.R. From *Publishers Weekly* American culture is in crisis, argues Berman, pointing out that "millions of high school graduates can barely read or write"; "common words are misspelled on public signs"; "most Americans grow old in isolation, zoning out in front of TV screens"; and "40% of American adults [do] not know that Germany was our enemy in World War II"--never mind that most students don't even want to learn Greek or Latin. Berman's lament that "like ancient Rome [American culture] is drifting into an increasingly dysfunctional situation" at first makes his book seem like a neoconservative treatise along the lines of the late Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. But Berman, who teaches in the liberal arts masters program at Johns Hopkins University, doesn't locate the cause of this malaise in multiculturalism or postmodernism, as Bloom did (although he is no fan of either one), but rather in the increasing dominance of corporate culture and the global economy, which he claims creates a homogenous business and consumer culture that disdains art, beauty, literature, critical thinking and the principles of the Enlightenment. Berman's provocative remedy is to urge individuals who are appalled by this "McWorld" to become "sacred/secular humanist" monks who renounce commercial slogans and the "fashionable patois of postmodernism" and pursue Enlightenment values. While Berman's eclectic approach often makes for engaging reading, his quirky and almost completely theoretical solutions are unlikely to galvanize many readers. Agent, Candice Fuhrman. (June) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. Brilliantly observant, deeply thoughtful ....lucidly argued. -- *Christian Science Monitor* Named a "Choice Selection of the Year" -- *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 3, 2000 Named a "New York Times Notable Book" -- *New York Times Book*, Dec. 3, 2000