

WHAT'S WRONG WITH MOVIES? MY GENERATION, CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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No one can deny that American culture has changed significantly over the last forty years. These cultural changes have been manifest in all arenas of American society, and there is no reason to expect that academia would be excluded. In each of their essays, Mark Edmundson, an English professor at the University of Virginia, and David Denby, a film critic for the *New Yorker*, address the impact of contemporary culture on the attitudes and behaviors of modern college students. Edmundson and Denby notice similar trends but come to conclusions that differ substantially in intensity and perspective.

In his essay “On the Uses of a Liberal Education: I. As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students,” Edmundson attacks the impact of modern consumer culture on the academic world. He believes students and teachers must resist this entertainment ethos and return to the concept of genius to overcome apathy. On the other hand, in “Homer I,” David Denby writes from a different, perhaps more culturally revealing, perspective, having returned to Columbia University to retake the Core Curriculum. Denby too senses academic apathy in modern students, but he nevertheless points out similarities to his own experiences in college. More importantly, Denby’s essay reveals a lot about cultural evolution through his discussion of his own progression from a heavy reader to a restless and fidgety one. As a current first-year college student, I can speak to the cultural motivations behind the behavior that my generation, as a whole, has exercised in academia. In a sense, the modern college student is taking off from the point where Denby has landed. We have grown up in the same culture that has turned him into a restless reader. It is not clear yet where we will go from here. And it is also not clear that our departure point is necessarily inferior to Denby’s. Ultimately, it comes down to perspective. The authors differ significantly in perspective, but neither author views the issue from the perspective of the students themselves, and, as a result, all they can offer is speculation on our state of mind. My perspective, however, is not without its own flaws, being that I have an inherent desire to defend myself and my generation. Even so, I understand the positions of each author and do not find them wholly without merit.

In his essay, Edmundson represents the modern college student as an ironic, skeptical, laidback consumer, who never gets too excited about any intellectual idea and constantly looks to relate his studies to pop culture. Edmundson blames this degeneration on the “culture of consumption” that pervades the academic world (4). Edmundson writes how a university administration today can transform its campus into a “retirement spread for the young” in order to attract the most appealing students

(5). Furthermore, Edmundson contends that, contrary to the 1960s, when there was no doubt that the college, not the student, was in charge, now colleges market to students (6). Edmundson even goes so far as to call the current process “a buyer’s market” (6). As a college freshman who very recently went through the college application process, I can confirm that it is anything but. While I understand that colleges are in constant competition for applications from the best students, the students are in a much fiercer competition to get into the best colleges. High school students don’t stress over their class ranks, take SAT prep classes, and load up on AP classes and extracurricular activities because they want access to the finest gym equipment money can buy. Some of them are certainly so competitive because they think their financial future depends on the name written at the top of their college diploma. But the great majority of them are so competitive because they want access to the best academic resources and most distinguished professors. In short, they want an education.

Despite his bias, Edmundson aptly portrays the formation of the current culture and the indoctrination implemented on my generation. He admirably avoids the temptation to blame the students themselves for their perceived shortcomings, instead acknowledging the profound effect of his generation (which “let the counterculture search for pleasure devolve into a quest for commodities”) on the current cultural outlook of modern college students—the children of Edmundson’s generation (4). The idealism and radical enthusiasm of the baby-boomers, who constantly challenged the status quo, fizzled into cynical consumerism. The effect of this shift on my generation was both cultural and personal. Not only did it affect the culture that we were raised in—a culture that came to value material goods and the sound bite—but it also affected our view of cultural rebellion itself.

My parents went to Reed College, one of the most liberal and activist schools in the country, especially in the 1960s and ’70s. I have heard every story about protests, marches, and students taking over college buildings. And that’s great. The times certainly called for a response from the youth of America, and they delivered. But they didn’t change the world. In the end, they came to accept the world that their parents had created. My dad is a federal prosecutor, and my mom is a college professor. Neither of them would be too happy to see any colleges taken over any time soon. My parents were part of a movement that was trying to change the system, and now they work for that system. What exactly does that say to me and my generation? It doesn’t say you can’t change anything so don’t bother trying. But it does say be skeptical of radical ideas. So despite the stories they may hear, students now have no reason to challenge the culture, no reason as Edmundson puts it to “make a spectacle of themselves” (3).

Edmundson accurately describes how this culture was formed and how it has affected academic institutions, but I am not convinced that he understands the perspective of the student, and I find his conclusion, if it can be called that, about the

future of the university simplistic and inadequate. In his essay Edmundson covers one and only one aspect of the academic exchange at colleges—class discussion. He may be right that as a result of a culture that devalues brash comments, discussion has devolved from its heyday in the 1960s into “rebound teaching” in which the teacher takes a student’s “weightless comment” and turns into a valid and interesting point about the subject (5). However, this in no way reflects a lack of intellectual curiosity. Cultural evolution may hinder full-fledged, highly enthusiastic discussion in class, but students still engage in the material through in class questions and comments (which may be timid but are nonetheless legitimate), papers, and individual reflection. As a result, I reject Edmundson’s notion that the current academic atmosphere is molding nothing more than “one dimensional men and women . . . who live for easy pleasures” (11). Moreover, I find his assertion that “it is up to individuals and individual students in particular to make their own way against the current sludgy tide” (12) completely unrealistic. If Edmundson truly wants a return to the academic exuberance of the 1960s, he cannot expect it to come from a generation that was born twenty years later.

Edmundson’s argument that something is wrong culminates in his discussion of the loss of the concept of genius. Edmundson believes that the idea of genius, which has been “denigrated” by the current academic culture, has the power to reverse the trends of intellectual apathy (11). He writes, “By embracing the works and lives of extraordinary people, you can adapt new ideals to revise those that came courtesy of your parents, your neighborhood, your clan—or the tube” (11). Edmundson seems to imply that what the current generation of college students lacks is ambition; in short, that we are resigned to a culture that values “the easy A,” that we care only about making money without having to work too hard. Edmundson quotes Walter Jackson Bate in praising a concept of education in which we link ourselves to past geniuses “through what Keats calls an ‘immortal free-masonry’” in order to be “what we most want and value” (11). I agree with Edmundson that connecting with and imitating the geniuses of the past can put us in a position to do great things, and I also agree that the modern college student may not embody this ideal, in large part, because of the skepticism our culture seems to have engrained in us. But rather than eliminating the pursuit of genius altogether, I think this skepticism has delayed our receptivity to the concept, forcing us to search harder and longer for it. It was Keats himself who said, “The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted.” We are in that space between. We ought to be uncertain at this point in our lives. We ought to be skeptical. We ought to question those who we are told are geniuses. We should seek out that which inspires it and embrace it, but we’re in no rush.

David Denby’s contemporaries at Columbia in the early ’60s were in a rush. Denby describes them as “preoccupied with Sartre and Kafka, Beethoven and Modern Jazz Quartet,” creating a “snobbish version of Columbia” (40). As an undergraduate at

Columbia more than forty years later, I can confirm that that era has passed. Denby raises some of the same issues as Edmundson when comparing his class to modern Columbia students. He describes something very similar to “rebound teaching” in his reference to “lockup” among the freshman in his Literature Humanities, or “Lit Hum” class (44). Denby talks about how the professor, Tayler, “would take what the student had said, however minimal, and play with it, enlarging it so it made some kind of sense, and then weave it together with the three or four intelligible words that someone else had said” (44). However, Denby is far less critical and even comments that he “often didn’t know the answer” and felt anxious when he was in school (44). Moreover, Denby mentions the fact that Tayler’s “rebound teaching” often gave students the confidence to participate in an actual full-fledged academic discussion (44). Denby’s comments suggest that things aren’t quite as bad as Edmundson’s nearly apocalyptic position makes them out to be.

Of course, neither author argues from a precise or scientific standpoint. Both are bound by their highly subjective positions. Despite these obvious shortcomings and limitations, their perspectives do have unique advantages in analyzing academic and cultural changes. Both authors are well-educated, presumably in their forties or fifties, and highly attuned to the cultural changes they have witnessed in their lifetimes. However, they seem to have taken divergent career paths—Edmundson has stuck to his academic roots in becoming a professor, while Denby has seemingly launched himself into American pop culture by becoming a film critic. As a result, Edmundson is highly critical, sheltered by an academic, somewhat arrogant vantage point, while Denby has chosen a profession that allows him, in a way, to criticize the culture from within.

From this perspective, Denby offers an interesting account of the cultural evolution that has taken place in the last forty years and the impact it has had on the attitudes of the typical college student. Upon his return to Columbia University to retake Lit Hum and Contemporary Civilizations, Denby recounts the days of his youth and college years, when he “would fall into a novel for hours” sitting in bed in his dorm room (47). Now in his late forties, Denby describes his lack of “discipline for serious reading,” his concentration wandering “after twenty pages” (36). Denby himself seems to have devolved in parallel with the culture. He explores the “culprit” of this descent, considering and then dismissing the notion that all the movies he’s seen in the last thirty years have “broken the circuits” (47). Instead Denby suggests the theory that his “life had grown much more complex” to account for his daydreaming (47). I offer another theory. I would argue that Denby’s lack of enthusiasm for reading has less to do with his own development into adulthood than with the development in culture that has occurred since his youth. In my opinion, Denby was on the right track when he contributed his literary downfall to movies. He grew up in a culture that valued literature and reading for hours. My generation has grown up in a different culture—

a culture where children and adults alike are sucked in by television and movies and have trouble truly delving into a book, especially when it's required reading.

Edmundson is right. In considering the question of why the modern college student is so different now than he or she was forty years ago, the answer is most definitely the culture. Culture has changed, as it inevitably does and will in the future. Many like Edmundson believe that it has changed for the worse, especially in the academic realm. Maybe Edmundson will prove prophetic. Maybe the skepticism and apparent indifference he describes do signify a serious problem with the academic future of our country. Maybe they are the beginning of the end. But maybe what's really coming to an end is not intellectual curiosity or genius, as Edmundson concludes. We still care about ideas. They're just different ideas. We may not be interested in revolution, but that doesn't mean we won't change the world. We may be more concerned with *Pulp Fiction*, Kurt Vonnegut, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers than with *Macbeth*, Aristotle, and Mozart, but is there anything wrong with that? Edmundson's utopian vision of an academic world where thirty passionate students develop a Freudian interpretation of *Survivor* is a fantasy. In its place sits a generation of individuals who are, at worst, jaded, cynical, and bored and, at best, intelligent, ambitious, and critical. It may take more for us truly to get excited about an idea, but when we do, we can be just as intense and passionate about it as our predecessors, though we may not show it. Maybe we haven't lost the concept of genius as Edmundson affirms; maybe we're just looking for it in different places and with a little more discretion.

WORKS CITED

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