

merely to an educated elite. We are reminded of just how lowbrow Shakespeare was during his own time by Madden's movie, when it culminates in a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* to the roaring approval of the working men and women of London, even if a queen sits disguised among them. It was a considerably better dressed crowd at the recent Oscars, but *Shakespeare in Love's* being awarded the most Oscars echoes Shakespeare's own success. Whether or not Ben Jonson's attribution is true—that William Shakespeare knew little Latin, and less Greek—it has stuck, but not, I believe, in the way Jonson intended it. Jonson meant his description of Shakespeare's learning as a criticism, but in increasingly democratic times it has become a mark of praise. Shakespeare's poetry does not depend on book learning. This historical transformation of a criticism into praise is entirely appropriate. This praise does not mean that we look down on the learning of the past, but that if truth is accessible to the human mind it is not a privilege of the classics. If there is anything we should learn from the classics, I believe that this is it.

Popular culture is popular because it resonates with life. At its worst it resonates with the lowest, most vulgar, or most trivial aspects of life, but at its best, it appeals to life's complexity, its nobility, and its wisdom. If we fail to distinguish these different aspects of popular culture we are as guilty of simple-minded prejudice as those who would abandon the classics because they are old. The vitality of the classics is based on their reflection on human experience, an experience continually revealed to us if we are wise enough to look for it.

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The Corrosive Trivialization of Culture

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When it comes to education, almost every rule has exceptions. And I am sure that there are instances in which a plausible case could be made for giving over some part of a liberal arts curriculum to the study of popular culture. By and large, however, I believe that when we talk about "Higher Education and the Study of Popular Culture" we are talking about an educational disaster area. Nor, to borrow an image from the Australian philosopher David Stove, is it a disaster area "of the merely passive kind, like a bombed building, or an area that has been flooded. It is the active kind, like a badly-leaking nuclear reactor, or an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in cattle."

I could easily devote the rest of my comments to retailing horror stories on the theme of "Higher Education and the Study of Popular Culture." So could

you. And although there is a certain gruesome pleasure to be had from such litanies, they have become so familiar that we are all suffering a bit from outrage-fatigue. So instead of piling up more anecdotes, I'll content myself with asking you to think back over your personal anthology of horror stories. We all have our favorites. The University of X where students get credit for studying comic books, the University of Y where a learned professor dilates on gangster movies, the University of Z where television sit-coms are dissected in terms of the latest neo-post-structuralist anti-hegemonic theoretical discourse.

The situation long ago rendered parody impossible. No sooner does one concoct some preposterous absurdity than one discovers that an enterprising professor somewhere has already set up a course, or maybe an entire department, devoted precisely to the thing that, only yesterday, had seemed too ridiculous for words. Years ago, I thought some sort of nadir had been reached when my wife was in graduate school at Columbia University and she reported that a good deal of a class supposedly devoted to Victorian and Edwardian literature was given over to discussing the merits of the television series *Star Trek*.

How silly of me! These days, in comparison with much that is taught, studying *Star Trek* seems almost like studying Milton. Almost. In any event, I can't say that I was entirely shocked when I read a news item about Plymouth University in England where students can now obtain a degree in surfing. Emphasizing the academic rigor of the new three-year degree, Dr. Colin Williams, identified as the "head of surfing," said applicants would need A-levels as well as surf boards.

Perhaps surfing comes under the rubric of "physical culture" as much as "popular culture." But of course it is one of the chief ambitions of the whole academic popular culture industry to break down established scholarly hierarchies, transgress the conventional boundaries among disciplines, and interrogate the socially constructed, and therefore arbitrary, divisions that once separated so-called "high" subjects from their supposedly "low" counterparts.

Well, you've heard it all before. Indeed, one of the chief ironies attending the subject of higher education and the study of popular culture is how clichéd and formulaic it is. Like other pseudo-disciplines that depend more on ideology than intellectual substance—in other words, almost anything with the suffix "studies": women's studies, gender studies, cultural studies—the study of popular culture depends chiefly on novelty to stir up interest. And novelty, alas, is not an easily recyclable commodity.

The insinuation of popular culture into the liberal arts curriculum is a complex subject. It was motivated partly by a desire to make the curriculum more accessible to a student body that came to college with less and less in the way of intellectual accomplishment or general culture. In this sense, the introduction of popular culture into the college curriculum was part of the infamous effort to make education "relevant." In my view, when the subject is educa-

tion, one ought to regard the word “relevant” the way George Orwell regarded saints: guilty until proven innocent. For one thing, the demand for “relevance” almost always comes at the expense of the demand for rigor. For another, the “relevance” in question always seems to mean “relevance according to the prevailing left-wing orthodoxy.”

Nor is it an accident, as the Marxists used say, that when it comes to popular culture in the academy, the politics almost always turns out to be left-wing. The truth is that the study of pop culture has been pursued primarily as a means of attacking the traditional academic concentration on objects of high culture. The ubiquitous Henry Louis Gates, Jr., chairman of Harvard’s Afro-American Studies Department, was simply stating the truth when he noted that “ours was the generation that took over buildings in the late 1960s and demanded the creation of Black and Women’s Studies programs, and now . . . we have come back to challenge the traditional curriculum.” The consequence of the development that Professor Gates so candidly described is that many liberal arts majors are being graduated having read little more than a handful of popular novels, a bit of esoteric literary theory, and various works that confirm their chosen ideological prejudices. The great works of the tradition remain, literally, closed books.

In any event, the full story of how the study of popular culture triumphed in American (and, increasingly, English) higher education is for the sociologists to sort out. It happened gradually at first. There was a class period here, an elective there. Then one found entire courses devoted to some demotic subject. Finally the study of popular culture—if “study” is the *mot juste*: “mindless celebration” often seems more accurate—radically compromised the integrity of liberal arts education virtually everywhere. There are pockets of resistance here and there. But even at the best colleges and universities, one finds that the great populist tsunami has swept through the curriculum, overturning traditional assumptions about the goal of a liberal arts education and deeply transforming the curriculum.

In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold famously called for “a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.” The spirit that assured the academic triumph of popular culture is obviously deeply anti-Arnoldian. In fact, it is anti-Arnoldian in two senses. Not only does it oppose the kind of critical discrimination that distinguishes between better and worse; it also rejects the ideal of scholarly disinterestedness that Arnold endorsed. Thus it is that one regularly finds the very idea of disinterestedness ridiculed or “exposed” as a nefarious tool for enforcing the intellectual status quo.

Of course, one could cite many figures besides Arnold as representatives of the cultural ideals he espoused. But it is curious how central Arnold has been to the development that led to the enfranchisement of popular culture in the academy. For example, in her essay “One Culture and the New Sensibility”

(1965), Susan Sontag hailed those few brave souls—like herself of course—who exemplified the “new sensibility” of the 1960s and had “broken, whether they know it or not, with the Matthew Arnold notion of culture, finding it historically and humanly obsolescent.” In case there was any confusion, Sontag went on to explain that “the Matthew Arnold notion of culture defines art as the criticism of life—this being understood as the propounding of moral, social, and political ideas. The new sensibility understands art as the extension of life—this being understood as the representation of (new) modes of vivacity.” I do not say that Sontag’s alternative makes *sense*—what really are the “new modes of vivacity” she recommends?—but it certainly did capture the mood of the moment: Sontag came bearing the news of a new attitude, a new mode of feeling—indeed, a “new sensibility.”

As Sontag noted, at the center of this new sensibility was a self-conscious blurring or breaking down of accepted intellectual boundaries: the boundary between “scientific” and the “literary-artistic” cultures, between “art” and “non-art,” the frivolous and the serious, and above all between “high” and “low” culture—in other words, the very distinctions that what she contemptuously called “the Matthew Arnold notion of culture” presuppose. Disciples of the new sensibility, Sontag wrote, eagerly suppose that “the feeling (or sensation) given off by a Rauschenberg painting might be like that of a song by the Supremes”: the world of culture—high/low, good/bad—is jumbled together in a search for what Sontag calls “a new, more open way of looking at the world.”

In some ways, Sontag’s “new sensibility” is reminiscent of the extreme aestheticism Hermann Hesse described in his novel *The Glass Bead Game*. This game, Hesse wrote,

is a mode of playing with the total contents and values of our culture; it plays with them as, say, in the great age of the arts a painter might have played with the colors on his palette. All the insights, noble thoughts, and works of art that the human race has produced in its creative eras, all that subsequent periods of scholarly study have reduced to concepts and converted into intellectual property—on all this immense body of intellectual values the Glass Bead Game player plays like the organist on an organ.

There are, of course, important differences between the fantasy Hesse describes and the reality Sontag both chronicled and helped to create. Both are deeply aestheticizing—that is, deliberately amoral or anti-moral. But where Hesse envisions an aesthetic utopia in which “the best that has been thought and said” becomes fodder for a quasi-mystical elite, Sontag envisions a demotic chaos in which any distinction between high and low culture is deliberately effaced. Rauschenberg, the Supremes: it’s all one in the goulash of the new sensibility.

Thirty-odd years on, it may be difficult to recall how immensely influential this and other early essays by Sontag were. They both reflected and helped to

transform the intellectual and moral climate of America in the 1960s. Although Sontag operated mostly outside the academy as a “public intellectual,” the “new sensibility” she championed and epitomized soon swept through the university. For example, only two years after Sontag carried on about Robert Rauschenberg and the Supremes, Professor Richard Poirier was telling the world, via an article in *Partisan Review*, that the Beatles are “sometimes . . . like Monteverdi and sometimes their songs are even better than Schumann’s.” To which I can only say, “yeah, yeah, yeah.”

It is worth noting at this point that the triumph of popular culture in academic circles has been inexorably followed by its degradation. The more pop culture has been raised up—the more vigorously it has been championed by the cultural elite—the lower popular culture has sunk. Much as I enjoy the musical comedies of Fred Astaire, I do not think it is a good idea to expend much class time pondering them; but better that than the psychopathology of today’s rap music. In comparison with the pop music of today, the Beatles almost do seem like Monteverdi. At the same time, though—and this is one of the most insidious effects of the whole process—the integrity of high culture itself has been severely compromised by the mindless elevation of pop culture. The academic enfranchisement of popular culture has meant not only that a lot of trash has been mistaken as great art, but also that great art has been treated as if it were trash. When Allen Ginsberg (for example) is taught beside Shakespeare as a “great poet,” the very idea of greatness is rendered surreal and high art ceases to function as an ideal.

In his book *The Undoing of Thought*, the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut described this process of leveling. Finkielkraut distinguished between those who wish to obliterate distinctions in the name of politics and those who do so out of a kind of narcissism. The former, whom Finkielkraut describes as “multiculturalists,” wave the standard of radical politics and say (in the words of a nineteenth-century Russian populist slogan that Finkielkraut quotes): “A pair of boots is worth more than Shakespeare.” Those whom Finkielkraut calls “postmodernists,” waving the standard of radical chic, declare that Shakespeare is no better than the latest fashion—no better, say, than the newest item offered by the clothes designer Calvin Klein. The litany that Finkielkraut recites is familiar:

A comic which combines exciting intrigue and some pretty pictures is just as good as a Nabokov novel. What little Lolitas read is as good as *Lolita*. An effective publicity slogan counts for as much as a poem by Apollinaire or Francis Ponge. . . . The footballer and the choreographer, the painter and the couturier, the writer and the ad-man, the musician and the rock-and-roller, are all the same: creators. We must scrap the prejudice which restricts that title to certain people and regards others as sub-cultural.

The upshot is not only that Shakespeare is downgraded, but also that the bootmaker is elevated. "It is not just that high culture must be demystified," Finkelkraut writes, "sport, fashion and leisure now lay claim to high cultural status." A grotesque fantasy? Anyone who thinks so should take a moment to recall the major exhibition called "High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture" that the Museum of Modern Art mounted a few years ago: it might have been called "Krazy Kat Meets Picasso." Few events can have so consummately summed up the corrosive trivialization of culture now perpetrated by those entrusted with preserving it. Among other things, that exhibition demonstrated the extent to which the apotheosis of popular culture undermines the very possibility of appreciating high art on its own terms. When the distinction between culture and entertainment is obliterated, high art is orphaned, exiled from the only context in which its distinctive meaning can manifest itself: Picasso *becomes* a kind of cartoon. This, more than any elitism or obscurity, is the real threat to culture today. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt once observed, "there are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say."

And entertainment is much at issue here. One argument that is heard repeatedly for introducing or increasing the amount of popular culture taught in colleges is that students are intensely interested in it, that it "speaks to their experience." For example, no one will be surprised to hear that Dr. Williams, the "head of surfing" I mentioned earlier, predicted that students working for a degree in surfing were expected to be—"highly motivated because they'll be studying something that interests them." Moreover, the argument goes, since more and more students come to college ill-prepared, introducing the study of rock music or Hollywood movies or pulp fiction can at least spark *some* sort of interest in students. Maybe it's not the most desirable use of college time, but at least it works to keep students interested and in college. Besides, the student is at bottom a consumer, a customer, and ultimately college administrations, like every other management team, must keep the customer happy.

This familiar rationale recently got another airing when the University of Chicago, once known as among the most rigorous institutions in the country, announced that it was planning to dilute its Great Books core curriculum with offerings like "media/cinema studies" and "gender studies." As Chicago's new "vice president of marketing and recruitment" put it when asked about the change, "I don't know how many students we can attract if we go after those who only seek the life of the mind."

I thought that remark spoke volumes. And I have to confess that I did not like what I heard. It is certainly a long way from the educational philosophy of

Robert Maynard Hutchins, the distinguished president of the University of Chicago in its heyday. Asked why there weren't electives for undergraduates at the university, Hutchins patiently replied that if we knew enough to determine what we should be taught, we shouldn't be students.

People are of course shocked by such apparently high-handed statements today. But I believe that there is a lot in what Hutchins said. It at least has the courtesy to take students and their education seriously. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller wrote that one should give people not what they want but what they need. It is part of an educator's responsibility to do just that. We entrust teachers with such great authority over our young precisely because we expect them to be able to make these difficult discriminations.

I must say, too, that I have never had much sympathy with the argument that introducing pop culture into the curriculum is a good thing because it speaks to students "where they are" and that it is "relevant to their experience." For one thing, it is deeply patronizing, implying as it does that the best is too good, too hard, too "highbrow" for mere students. For another thing, as T.S. Eliot observed in his essay "Modern Education and the Classics," "No one can become really educated without having pursued some study in which he took no interest—for it is part of education to *learn to interest ourselves* in subjects for which we have no aptitude." This may seem a stern philosophy of education. But I believe we have to ask ourselves what job we want colleges to perform. Is college an extension of the entertainment industry? Or a socially agreed-upon form of child-minding? Or is it about transmitting knowledge to the next generation? It may very well be that there are many—many, many too many—young people in college today who haven't a clue about how to take advantage of a liberal arts education. I myself believe this to be the case. The result is bad for everyone: bad for the students who could take advantage of a liberal arts education, for they are given a dumbed-down curriculum, and bad for those who really have no interest in a liberal arts education, for they are denied the kind of useful training that would help them in later life. For everyone, the injection of pop culture into the curriculum is merely a device for diluting the course of studies and reinforcing the present-centered nature of education.

My own view is that a liberal arts education should concentrate as rigorously as possible on works that have proved to be of permanent value; in practice, that means that few if any contemporary works should be part of the undergraduate curriculum. This is not to say that students should not read contemporary fiction and criticism, or that they should not go to the movies, listen to contemporary music, and generally immerse themselves in the life of the moment. In fact, any young person who is intellectually alive and curious will do all these things as a matter of course. The bottom line is that contemporary culture should not form the basis of a college education. One should

look to the past, not to the streets, for the substance of the liberal arts curriculum. For most students, college represents four unrepeatable years when they can devote themselves to “the best that has been thought and said.” Every pop novel that is read in class, every rap song that is dissected, every movie that is watched means one fewer play by Sophocles, one less treatise by Kant, one less poem by Goethe, one less novel by George Eliot.

To a large extent, the question of whether one should study pop culture in college is a pragmatic question: is it a good use of resources? I believe that the answer is an unequivocal no. There are plenty of subsidiary reasons to worry about popular culture: political reasons, intellectual reasons, moral reasons. I have rehearsed some of these reasons in my book *Tenured Radicals*. But for students, parents, and teachers, the first reason to be wary of studying popular culture in the university is that it almost guarantees that the expensive education one has paid for will turn out to be one more vacation from genuine intellectual engagement. In other words, studying pop culture in the university is a way of assuring that you won't get what you paid for: a liberal arts education.

The Tyranny of the Near-at-Hand

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There are some things, George Orwell once remarked, that can only be learned at university. He did not mean the quip as a compliment, and I suspect that he would give popular culture studies the satiric send-up it often deserves. Granted, Orwell did not have to deal with a contemporary academy at something of a loss to say what should, or should not, be worthy of college credit; but for us—and for better or worse—the ever-burgeoning world of electives has been around for a very long time, and I see little evidence that we are likely to return to the days when the curriculum for college sophomores could be printed on a single page.

As with Gaul, electives fall into three categories: the solid, the so-so, and the downright silly. Indeed, if we had reason to believe that, taken together, the undergraduate curriculum added to up a solid liberal education, who among us would get seriously worked up about courses in comic books, TV sit-coms, or a hundred other flowers? The rub, of course, is that only the very benighted continue to believe that what currently passes for higher education constitutes a coherent body of learning, one likely to serve our students well in the decades after graduation; and only the severely pinchfaced feel that popular culture has absolutely no place in the curriculum—despite (or perhaps, be-