

Creative Class, Dismissed

Students take the arts' nobility as gospel until they meet a heretic named Jean-Jacques

By LAURIE FENDRICH

Recently I've been teaching, in a couple of undergraduate seminars, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre* (1758), the most provocative essay on the arts ever written. It is about the unintended effects of theater — which, for Rousseau, stands in for all of the arts — on an audience. The essay is an impassioned rebuttal to the 1757 entry on Geneva, written by Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, in the huge Enlightenment project, *Encyclopédie*, in which d'Alembert says that Geneva would be an even finer city if only it didn't have laws banning theater. Rousseau says that, au contraire, theater would actually be harmful to the citizens of Calvinist Geneva and tries to prove that the prohibition is a good thing.

To my students, Rousseau's astonishing position collides head-on with the TV-drenched, movie-dependent, iPodified, grind-dancing world in which many of them spend a good part of their lives. The idea that their world of stories and entertainment — even in its more respectable precincts such as *Masterpiece Theatre* and U2 benefit concerts — could possibly be harmful to them is the furthest thing from their minds. In studying Rousseau's essay, my students directly confront their stormy love affair with mass culture. They learn the extent to which their youthful values are already in deep conflict with one another. They

experience — albeit in fitful spasms — a sense of urgency about their lives, realizing with a kind of awe that their college years mark one of the most significant life passages they will ever face.

In the *Letter*, Rousseau's preoccupation is with how to sustain "virtue" in the face of modernity. "Virtue" is a word that nearly all of my students initially choke on, as its contemporary meaning applies mostly to anachronistic notions of female chastity. None of them have ever thought much about virtue, but Rousseau, drawing inspiration from ancient Greek political philosophy, is deeply attached to the idea. For him, virtue existed only in communities whose citizens knew how to put aside self-interest for the sake of the whole. The places where Rousseau could find virtue, alas, were confined to a few small, free republics scattered through history, such as ancient Sparta or 18th-century Geneva, and not in freewheeling metropolises such as Paris, awash in urban luxury. Rousseau's essay argues that the twin vices of vanity and competition, born when man left the "state of nature" and formed societies, inevitably destroy virtue and happiness.

Rousseau, the Enlightenment's party pooper, shocks college students by trashing education and reason, science and art, and the advancement of knowledge in general.

Most students have come to college at least partly to "make themselves better." Rousseau seems to be telling them not to fool themselves. Their real motives, he implies, are vanity and ambition. And nothing fuels those two vices, Rousseau says, like the arts.

Such a counterintuitive attack on the arts jolts my art students in particular. Since their early childhoods, they've been taught that by making and showing off their finger paintings, class plays, and rhythm-band performances, they're somehow doing a very nice thing for themselves and everyone around them. Although my students readily concede Rousseau's initial premises that theater's purpose is to entertain (that is, to give pleasure) and that it's a luxury rather than a necessity, they have a hard time accepting the possibility that it might be truly deleterious.

But the pleasure that theater provides, Rousseau argues, is based on the display of unruly passions, and it's addictive: Almost everyone who encounters theater wants more and more of it. Worse, Rousseau says, theater "tends everywhere to promote and increase the inequality of fortunes" because it triggers a host of artificial desires. And even when theater is great, and its audience consists of decent people, Rousseau argues, whether or not we're made better by it depends on who we are to begin with. Many of us are made worse by theater precisely because we're introduced to bad ideas we'd never thought of before. The modern media echoes Rousseau's claim regularly, especially after tragedies like that at Virginia Tech: Villains "accustom the eyes of the people to horrors that they ought not even to know and to crimes they ought not to suppose possible."

Theater also engenders in us the fuzzy feeling that we become good people merely by watching other people — none of whom we know personally — pretending to be good or bad people on the stage and then identifying ourselves only with the good ones: "The continual emotion that is felt in the theater excites us, enervates us, enfeebles us, and makes us less able to resist our passions. And the sterile interest taken in virtue serves only to satisfy our vanity without obliging us to practice it."

In short, theater's smoke and mirrors seduce us into substituting art for moral action. And even though theater might keep unvirtuous people in big cities distracted and somewhat in check, Rousseau thinks it causes generally good people to become restless and unhappy with their own lives because it makes their own lives seem, by comparison, boring. In fact, the better theater is, the more inherently debilitating it is to real life. In sum: Theater is slightly good only for bad people, and quite bad for good people.

This conclusion puts my students in a philosophical pickle because they tend to be convinced by Rousseau's logic but still think of their theater-liking selves as essentially good. They're good people, they think, because they're reasonable people getting an education that will make them even more reasonable. But Rousseau, borrowing heavily from Plato, argues that reason, compared to the strong force of habit, is pretty weak in determining human behavior. Habits, Rousseau says, come from three sources: law, pleasure, and — the most powerful of all — public opinion. And habits are, by definition, resistant to change. Even the law is ineffective when it tries to get people to change their ways too rapidly. The best way to change engrained

habits lies in gently manipulating public opinion.

Now, most of my students have thought very little about either their own habits or habits in general. In closed societies of the kind Rousseau admired — small republics with strong censorship and active, virtuous citizens who know one another — every member of the community enforces the habits of every other member with spying eyes. My students see communities with spying eyes in terms either of wicked foreign theocracies or small, rural American towns. To them, lives lived in such communities seem boxed in, if not outright oppressed. But Rousseau teaches the opposite — that these are good lives. Artists, with their vanity and longing for fame, have no business intruding in them. Their meddling — for example, putting on plays — can result only in destabilization and destruction.

Most of my students struggle hard over this idea. They arrive in college assuming education and the distribution of knowledge are, *prima facie*, good things. The idea that the opposite might be true — that art and science destroy the joy in many people by making their way of life seem stupid and unsophisticated — rattles everyone in the room.

Tucked into the middle of Rousseau's inveighing against theater is a discussion of women that makes the remarks of Larry Summers, Harvard's former president, seem almost conciliatory. Rousseau claims that the equality of the sexes is a foolish, modern idea. The differences between the sexes are there for anyone to see, linked as they are to anatomy. Rousseau will not quarrel with nature's plumbing. Women, he argues, are not only the receivers of sexual advances, but the inherently weaker sex as

well. But, he says, nature gave women a weapon to protect themselves from more powerful males: modesty.

For Rousseau, modesty is the means by which women fend off undesirable males and encourage only the ones they regard as potential mates. And once the appropriate male has been snared, Rousseau says, women employ another tool to keep their otherwise hit-and-run mates around for the long haul: love. "Love is the realm of women. It is they who necessarily give the law in it, because, according to the order of nature, resistance belongs to them, and men can conquer this resistance only at the expense of their liberty."

Rousseau turns upside down the ideas my students carry about the sexes. He seems to say that women are fit only to become dutiful, breeding Stepford wives. Most of my students are outraged when they first read this part of the *Letter*. During one of my seminars, students unanimously contended that modesty is imposed on women by insecure men.

As repugnant as Rousseau's precepts about women are, they're crucial to his argument about theater, and, as much as I'd like to, I can't simply sweep them under the rug. He says that going to the theater destroys female modesty and replaces it with vanity (I always bring up the irrepressible female longing for a new dress for a party). When female modesty declines, Rousseau argues, men stop loving women because they no longer trust them. Who else, the husband asks himself, is my wife preening for? Such distrust, Rousseau says, in the end obliterates love.

In class discussion, when my students invariably protest that Rousseau is an outdated chauvinist, I ask why most

women in contemporary society wear makeup and most men don't, and why there isn't a store called *Victor's Secret*. We talk about Jane Austen's women, their trade-offs between true love and men who, however repellent, provide security, and how much of that kind of social survivalism is still practiced today. These discussions are unsettling, I admit, even to me. But whether by habit or nature, I unfailingly wear lipstick to class.

Concepts of the sexes aside, my students can readily see that when Rousseau goes after theater, he's also going after their movies, music, and television. He attacks most of their largely unexamined ideas: that small-town life is stultifying and big-city life is where it's at; that artists and intellectuals are superior to everybody else; that censorship is bad; and that art is uplifting and good for a society. Most upsetting, Rousseau challenges them to look at their reasons for being in college. The platitude pounded into them since kindergarten — "Education is the key" — suddenly seems meaningless. Key to what? No matter how learned or artistically sophisticated we become, Rousseau teaches, we still have but a frail grasp of what it takes to be good or happy.

Most of my students end up reluctantly siding with Rousseau. His rhetorical passion for virtue, coupled with the fact that he follows up general observations with particular, well-chosen examples, can't easily be refuted. But siding with Rousseau leaves them incapable of justifying their lives. To open the window to criticism of Rousseau, I point out what I see to be flaws in his argument — for example, that he ignores how often small towns wreak misery on good people who happen to be a bit different, which is why they hightail it to big cities. I raise the

problem of how often good people have narrow minds.

There's no happy reconciliation of art and morals at the end of reading Rousseau, as there is in, say, Kant or Schiller. There's only a stark question: What do we choose — art or virtue? Generally speaking, my students are fraught with contradictions. They sense that they face the moral job of finding the courage of their convictions — even in speech, in our seminar meetings — but their youthful intellectual blossoming confuses them about exactly what their convictions are. Rousseau teaches that reason and moral conviction are often in tension with each other, and that their reconciliation may not be possible.

Rousseau has an overarching thesis that considers people to be good by nature but corrupted by society. My students like that, since it reassures them that it's not entirely their fault every time they do something bad, but rather that some larger social force "made me do it." And Rousseau articulates the longings in my students for more of a reason to live than competing for who's the best looking and smartest, or who ends up with the most toys.

Many students tell me that reading Rousseau makes them conscious of the fact that ineluctably fascinating human wrongdoing almost always trumps the dullness of virtue, and that people who cheerily trumpet art (especially that which showcases bad behavior as entertainment) are blind to both art's power and its peril. One of my former seminar members recently wrote me that he was glad he'd read *Letter to d'Alembert* because he'd learned from it that, in the end, he prefers being miserable and loving art to his earlier childhood state of being happy and

ignorant of it. This student was clear, at least: He was choosing art over virtue.

Whatever their ultimate opinions, I like to think Rousseau's essay humbles my students just a little, in just the right way, and at just the right moment in their lives.

It reminds them that the kind of moral person they are becoming will never, ever hinge on the fact that they're getting a college degree.

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