

Beyoncé Studies

by Theodore Dalymple



The musicology department of Copenhagen University is to offer a course on the music of Beyoncé. It would be fun, it said.

I think it is probably true that most readers of the *Review* have limited knowledge of Beyoncé; but to judge by the number of entries on Google devoted to her, she is 25 per cent more important than Hitler ever was, and three times more important than Lenin. Whatever you might think of her music, then (assuming you think anything of it at all), she and her music are clearly important as a phenomenon.

Popular culture is clearly an important subject of academic study, especially in an age like ours in which it fills people's minds, moulds their opinions, shapes their ambitions and daydreams, and affects their behaviour. No sociologist (or social historian of the future) could afford to disregard popular culture.

There is another way to study culture, however, and that is *sub specie aeternitatis*, from point of view of what is intrinsically meritorious or valuable. Not everything popular is bad, of course, but not everything popular is good. We do not study Shakespeare because he was popular in Elizabethan London, so that we may find out about the mentality of Londoners four and a half centuries ago. We study Shakespeare because his speaks both beautifully and profoundly to all subsequent ages, and perhaps to any conceivable age. We study Victorian melodrama not because it was good, but because it tells us something about Victorian society and its mentalities.

These two ways of, or reasons for, studying culture are different, though they may sometimes overlap a little. Such are the trends in modern universities, however, that the two ways and reasons are increasingly elided.

The first trend that accounts for this elision is purely intellectual. Philosophical relativism, the denial that there is any objective basis for judgments of worth or value, has become almost an orthodoxy in humanities departments. And if there is no real difference between good and bad, why go to the trouble of studying the difficult when the easy is, by definition, just as good?

The second trend is the commercial imperative under which universities now operate. To put it crudely (and as academics now often put it themselves), they need bums on seats. What better way to get them there than to 'study,' as if academically, what the students already know and like, and to flatter them into believing that their taste is impeccable?

The University of Copenhagen needed twenty applicants to make its study of Beyoncé commercially viable. It immediately received eighty.

First published in