
Her article, among other things, drew an unfavourable comparison between celebrities such as Paris Hilton “and her ilk” and Marilyn Monroe.

In Monroe’s case, according to Dowd, at least she knew “it was cool to be smart” and she read books and possessed a personal library of over 400 volumes. Monroe is for many remembered as a sex symbol, yet Dowd reminds us that Monroe’s husband Arthur Miller referred to Monroe as, “a poet on a street corner trying to recite to a crowd pulling at her clothes”.

There is always a sense of deep tragedy in the story of Marilyn Monroe, truly a “candle in the wind”.

Contemporary popular culture often seems to celebrate people whose only real achievements appear to be having money and being vulgar.

There is no sense of tragedy in the vulgar antics of many present-day celebrities.

No candle in the wind moment for them. No irony, no sense that there is something more to aspire to than vulgarity and money. Paris Hilton is no Marilyn Monroe.

What is happening with popular culture? Why has much of it plummeted to such depths?

For some of my readers who may wonder at what I am referring to, take a walk in your local shopping mall and listen to the lyrics of some of the contemporary music played.

Surf the web and reflect on what is put in front of you. What effect is this having on our youth? What effect is it having on our society?

The shifting sands of our popular culture are now the critical place where young people learn.

Compared to the messages taught by our teachers, directives issued by our politicians or opinions pontificated on by columnists such as yours truly, the power of popular culture to transform and mould the young has overwhelming authority.

For youth, the effect of the debasement of the culture and the increasing vulgarity which is now common place from movies through to music must have a deep effect. However, the problem is not simply a youth culture issue.
In the United States, the result of this decline in respect of intellect appears to be the growing ascendency of know nothing politicians who celebrate ignorance as a path to power.

The rise of Sarah Palin is a case in point. Appeal to prejudice and rest assured that many voters read very little. Thus is the road to power.

Of course, things are perhaps not as bad or as pessimistic as I have outlined.

There are countervailing trends and influences. However, the general decline in civility, propriety and decency in our popular culture is not something that can be dismissed lightly.

Also it is not simply an American phenomenon that we in Malaysia can dismiss as someone else’s issue.

This is in part due to the power of American culture globally and the way it influences youth through constructing visions of success, desire and fame.

This growing individualistic, consumerist and vulgar culture is now global and Malaysia is not immune from it. In fact, some astute thinkers have suggested that our minds may be in fact “captive” to this culture.

Malaysian scholars who have sought to challenge and analyse this “captivity” deserve credit for their efforts.

I have referred to scholars such as the late Syed Hussein Alatas in previous columns in regards to this prescient and still deeply relevant analysis.

Part of the problem we face is the reduction of culture to the profit motive and the resultant vulgarisation that follows.

Theodor Adorno, one of the 20th century’s great critics of “the culture industry” argued, for example, that, “the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked into cultural forms” (Theodor Adorno, TheCulture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture, Routledge, 1991, page 86). Driven by the profit motive, no vulgarity is off limits.

Are there things we can do to address this cultural captivity and vulgarity? Well, one idea which is a pet bug bear of mine is to ask shopping mall owners to take a look at the music played in stores and public places, and ensure the lyrics are in keeping with a basic standard of propriety.

I recognise it’s a small thing but we have to start somewhere!

On another tack we could make sure that we address the spiraling price of books.

It’s hard to get people to read and appreciate that there are forms of aspiration beyond the antics of popular culture idols when it’s so expensive to do so.
Finally and most importantly, we can start to teach critical reading and thinking in our schools and higher educational institutions.

Many teachers do this already and they are an asset to Malaysia.

Encouraging them and building on best practice may help to build the cognitive skills necessary for future citizens to see through and oppose the preaching of demagogues and know nothings who prosper in a culture of ignorance.

Dowd’s opinion and lament on Making Ignorance Chic reminded me that there are voices seeking to turn the tide.

The problem we face is not simply the debasement of popular culture; ultimately it is the debasement of our democracy. Education plays a role but the problem I refer to is bigger than our learning institutions ability to handle.

Addressing it requires a holistic strategy and an understanding that unless we come to grips with the dumbing down of our culture, our efforts at realising a better and intelligently informed democracy will flounder.

I am not sure how we can fully address the issues I raise in this column. Better minds than mine have addressed it and we still are facing an uphill fight.

However, I do know the problems of a reduction of culture and discourse to vulgarity and profit motive must be addressed through debate and reflection and concerted action.

There is one thing I am sure of: we must aspire to cultural role models better than Paris Hilton and politicians whose reading list is longer than Sarah Palin’s. They are not role models for any culture to emulate.

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