

A Conversation with DAVID GELERENTER

Yale University professor David Gelernter is a pioneering computer scientist, cultural critic, and artist. In this conversation, Gelernter details the decline in America's cultural literacy over the last few generations—a phenomenon Gelernter terms “America-lite.” Gelernter also discusses computer science, the future of the Internet, and the promise and peril of new technologies. Finally, Kristol and Gelernter consider art and the art world today.

On students who know nothing, Gelernter says: Students today are so ignorant that it's hard to accept how ignorant they are. It's hard to grasp that [the student] you're talking to, who is bright, articulate, interested, doesn't know who Beethoven was. Looking back at the history of the 20th Century [he] just sees a fog. Has [only] the vaguest idea of who Winston Churchill was or why he mattered. No image of Teddy Roosevelt. We have failed [them].

On parents who know nothing, Gelernter says: In the 1970s and 80s, [the quality] of public school and college teaching went way down. Schools were failing to teach, but at least parents had been educated before the cultural revolution [of the 1960s]. So when their children were taught nonsense, at least they could say: “Hold on, not so fast, are you really sure about that?”...[Today] when children are taught nonsense, the parents say: “Yeah, that's what I was taught too.”

On a possible return to traditional art, Gelernter says: There are too many [genuine] art lovers who see a [conceptual art] installation [in which] a computer is talking in the corner, and say: “fine, it's fun, but frankly I've always been moved by paintings. Show me your paintings.” I think we're moving back in a healthy direction. [Artists] once again understand that they need to learn to draw. They need to draw in live studios. They need draw the human figure. They need to know it.

Chapters in DAVID GELERENTER Conversation

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