

2013

Rushmore's Max Fischer and Dwight Macdonald's "Midcult"

Emily A. Pugh

Arcadia University, epugh@arcadia.edu

Arcadia University has made this article openly available. [Please share](#) how this access benefits you. Your story matters. Thank you.

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/undergrad_works



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pugh, Emily A., "Rushmore's Max Fischer and Dwight Macdonald's "Midcult"" (2013). *Faculty Curated Undergraduate Works*. Paper 4. http://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/undergrad_works/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at ScholarWorks@Arcadia. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Curated Undergraduate Works by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@Arcadia. For more information, please contact gordonl@arcadia.edu.

Emily Pugh

Media Studies

Dr. Dwyer

February 14th, 2013

Rushmore's Max Fischer and Dwight Macdonald's "Midcult"

Dwight Macdonald explains his theory of Midcult in his essay from *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain*. During the mid 1940's a new hybrid of culture was invented in our society. It is a mix of High Culture and Masscult, which he describes as "a peculiar hybrid bred from the latter's intercourse with the former" (Macdonald, 398). Macdonald calls this middle culture Midcult. Midcult presents itself as part of the High Culture while pretending to respect it, but ultimately it "vulgarizes" and "corrupts" the High Culture standards by being truly formulaic and without any standards (Macdonald, 398). The only standard Macdonald states that Midcult possesses is the standard of popularity (Macdonald, 398).

While re-reading this essay, a film immediately came to mind – *Rushmore*. This film focuses on the life of Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman), a high school student who dominates extracurricular activities at his private school while neglecting his academic life. He befriends both a teacher from the private school, Mrs. Cross (Olivia Williams), and a rich industrialist, Mr. Blume (Bill Murray). The character of Max Fischer exemplifies many aspects of Midcult. He attends a private prep school - Rushmore Academy. The school is very highbrow and would fall into the category of High Culture. It is distinguished, cultured, and does not adapt to the masses in any way. Max loves Rushmore. He is involved in calligraphy, Model UN, the French club, the fencing club, a director for the theater department, editor of the school paper, and a publisher in

the *Yankee Review*. He presents himself as fancy, cultured, and well educated. In reality, Max's grades are falling and he is placed on academic probation, threatening his attendance at Rushmore. Later in the film the audience finds out that Max is not the typical Rushmore student. He attends the private school on an academic scholarship and his family is not at all wealthy. His mother had passed away and his father is a barber. He presents himself as part of the High Culture of Rushmore, but he is only an imitation and a member of Macdonald's Midcult. Max has taste, education, and involves himself in many clubs and activities that place him above the Masscult standing. However, he is not in the rare High Culture.

Max's appearance throughout the movie stays true to that concept as well. While he attends Rushmore, his appearance goes above and beyond the other boys at the school. While they all wear their blue button down dress shirts and slacks, Max is outfitted in his navy suit jacket with a Rushmore patch sewn on the front. His hair is gelled to perfection and he wears thick black-rimmed frames. His appearance is a bit formulaic – something he thinks a person of High Culture would wear. He again presents himself as part of the High Culture, maybe even trying harder than the boys who are genuinely associated with the highbrow status. Max wants to impress the other boys, as seen in his dream of solving one of the hardest math equations with poise and ease. The motives are to impress his classmates, teachers, the headmaster and any other High Culture adult.

One of these adults is Mr. Blume. Mr. Blume is a rich industrialist whose sons attend Rushmore. Max deeply admires Mr. Blume and his successful career. After Mr. Blume is finished giving a speech to the members of Rushmore, Max gives him a standing ovation. He is the only one in the entire church to stand and clap for Mr. Blume. This shows his admiration and respect for the man. It is also one of the instances where Max goes beyond the others at school

and acts as if Mr. Blume has said the most insightful words the school has ever heard. Max tries to respect the standards of the High Culture (Mr. Blume), but again he is not a part of this culture.

When Max gets expelled from Rushmore and is forced to attend public school, he carries on the same behaviors. He gives a speech to his class on the first day of school still dressed in his polished Rushmore uniform. When another student, Margaret Yang (Sara Tanaka) reaches out to Max, he acts like she is below him. He keeps his head forward while walking down the hall and only turns his head when she mentions his Rushmore attire. He still acts part of this High Culture of Rushmore when in reality he is on the same cultural level of these students. Margaret is actually smarter than Max, getting all the attention and praise at the science fair. That is Max's dream – to be noticed and praised. Max's desire to impress the school carries on even when he is no longer around the High Culture people, which is like Macdonald's Midcult characteristic of appealing to the masses. He berates people if they are not up to the Rushmore standards and he even has the audacity to act that way towards real High Culture people like his headmaster and Mrs. Cross's significant other who is a Harvard graduate and medical doctor. In all of Max's actions and even his appearance, he corrupts the High Culture Macdonald describes in his essay.

Macdonald focuses his Midcult explanation mainly on novels, magazines and plays. This relation is a bit different, focusing on a person who falls into the specific category of Midcult. Max shows characteristics of Midcult, but his motives are different than MacDonald's original idea of universality or a focus on being mainstream. While Max does have the dream to be genius and popular, he is not trying to be mainstream or have universal characteristics. Max is 15 years old. Like many students that age, he wants to impress his peers and others around him. (He is not carrying around a collection of Shakespeare works, but his appearance is enough). In a

sense, he tries appeals to the masses. At first he appeared to only want to appeal to the highbrow people, but then when he attends public school he wants to appeal to everyone (his speech, the play, etc). Even though he tries to appeal to many, Max does not want to be universal. He is actually very unique. He stands out of the crowd, even at Rushmore where the boys all dressed the same. Although as I mentioned early the almost formulaic style to his dress, he still is unique to the others around him, at both schools. He is the founder to half of the clubs he participates in. His appearance, actions and ideas are anything but mainstream. He holds this uniqueness that a person in the Masscult category does not possess. Max doesn't want to be mainstream and he is never portrayed as mainstream in the film. He is a leader, not a follower. Max creates himself into a new subcategory within Midcult. He is a unique member of the Midcult, which stays true to his character.

Works Cited

Dwight Macdonald, "Masscult and Midcult," in *American Literature, American Culture*, ed. Gordon Hutner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 393-403.

Rushmore. Dir. Wes Anderson. Buena Vista, 1998. Film.



Ignoring Margaret in the hall



Standing after Mr. Blume's speech



The highbrow feel of Rushmore – headmaster and his office.



from the others

Max's appearance different



toward High Culture

Max's appearance and attitude



his leadership in those clubs

Max's involvement in clubs and