

## Media Meditation in 1990s Slacker Comedies

Sam Bollen

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *This excerpt from Sam's English JP explores the phenomenon of the slacker comedy and investigates its origin in the cultural materialism, economic stagnation and generational apathy of the 1990s. This introduction establishes Sam's definition of the "slacker" by grounding it in both scholarly literature and the cultural context, and uses this **key term** as a springboard for the rest of his argument.*

### *Excerpt*

Perhaps the first order of business is defining what, exactly, we mean when we say “slacker.” Malecka, somewhat euphemistically, defines the slacker as someone “whose relation to work is rather unconventional” (and slacker films as movies featuring these people as protagonists) (191). The knee-jerk reaction, of course, is to correct Malecka’s definition to “someone who doesn’t work,” or “doesn’t want to.” Certainly this wholly negative definition has been associated with the word since its popular inception, which was as a description for a draft dodger in the First World War—someone who wouldn’t do his duty out of some infirmity of character (in this case, cowardice) (Lutz 13). Lazy people have existed in America since the Puritans landed with dreams of a city on a hill, but “Only in the late 1980s and early 1990s did ‘slacker’ become what it is today, the widely used term for someone with a distaste for work, an identity that [could] be conferred or claimed, however ironically” (Lutz 14).<sup>1</sup> There is some truth, however, in Malecka’s hesitance to condemn the slacker—there is more to the slacker’s work antipathy than mere laziness. Chamberlain says that “the slacker phenomenon [of the 1990s] is all too easily explained as defensive posturing in reaction to a lack of opportunity [in the United States]” (47). This lack of opportunity has been blamed on various people and programs, Reagan(omics) perhaps foremost among them (Malecka 190). While this is part of the truth—in the nineties, income inequality increased drastically just as entry level wages decreased—it doesn’t quite capture the cultural moment in which the slacker arose (Malecka 190, Chamberlain 30-1).

Mixed up in bare economics was a kind of cultural exhaustion. Francis Fukuyama, the dominant political philosopher of the day, suggested in his paper (and later his book of the same title) “The End of History” that with the fall of Communism, we had arrived at the end of history, having found the best-functioning form of government; he characterized the end of the millennium as “an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism” (3). It should come as no surprise, then, for the dominant emotions of young Americans coming of age in this era to be

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<sup>1</sup> To be more explicit, the slacker has both an attitudinal and temporal requirement: the work antipathy (whatever it causes) and belonging to the generation coming of age in the late 80s and early 90s (colloquially known, thanks to Coupland, as Generation X)

ennui and angst. They were trapped in paradox: while they themselves were working jobs they were overqualified or underpaid to do, they had no enemy against whom to negatively define themselves, no goal (other than accumulation) to progress towards. Speaking broadly, the idealism of the sixties had been replaced with eighties materialism, but in the nineties this materialism collapsed on itself through lack of opportunity (Chamberlain 10-11, 47). Coupland's *Generation X*, which Chamberlain places alongside Nirvana's *Nevermind* and Linklater's *Slacker* as "culturally defining" for the era, expresses this feeling of apocalypse and trapped dissatisfaction (28-9). The novel takes place in the California desert and makes repeated reference to radiation, offworld travel, and underemployment (Coupland even invented the term "McJob") (5). Occasionally this contradiction is viewed more positively; Richard Linklater, the originator of the slacker film genre, delineated a modus operandi for the apparently listless:

You didn't have a lot to show for yourself, but you weren't an uninterested, unintelligent person, either...That kind of got lost in the go-go Eighties and the materialistic culture that sprang from out of that. You may have worked a busboy job but really you were in a band, you were a writer, you were an artist. That's how you defined yourself. (qtd. in Savlov)

### **Hating "Work"**

Dante, the neurotic protagonist of Kevin Smith's *Clerks*, exists squarely and uncomfortably within the former paradox. Like his namesake, Dante leads a purgatorial (and not-so-epic) existence—he considers himself too intelligent to be working in a convenience store but has neither the gumption to quit and make something of himself nor the relaxed mindset it would take to accept his situation. Hudson's management studies paper "Workplaces in the Cinema" analyzes the way different films depict the workplace. Using Coats's 2005 model for "good" or "bad" work, he points out several ways in which different film workplaces subject their employees to "bad work": for *Clerks*, the issue is primarily the "limited task discretion and monotony"—in slacker terms, even a "corporate stiff" in management studies sees that Dante's job sucks and is below his talents (Coats qtd. in Hudson 40). However, he praises the *Clerks* work environment for the high degree of control the characters have over their environment, and the high social capital—chances for friendly interaction—each of the characters has, although these both stem more from of the employer's lack of discretion and the disobedience of the employees than as a function of the workplace itself (40-1).

### *Author Commentary*

Sam Bollen

One of the first challenges in writing my JP on slacker films was defining the terms *slacker* and *slacker film*. While to me, a fan of the genre, these phrases had pretty obvious cultural reference points and definitions, I discovered that they were not immediately obvious categories to the average reader. Not only that, but both terms had relatively little scholarly work written on them. Katarzyna Malecka's very general paper on slacker films ("In Praise of Slacking") was helpful, as was Tom Lutz's *Doing Nothing*, a history of slacking throughout American history. While these gave me a general idea of how the word "slacker" had entered and developed in the American lexicon, and what the general parameters for a slacker movie were, I still hadn't quite captured the cultural milieu in which they came to be, and therefore what these movies were really *about*. This is where I had to expand my research beyond just what was immediately related to my project—books and papers about my chosen films—and investigate cultural histories of the nineties and other works of the time, including, significantly, *Generation X* by Douglas Coupland and *Slackomics* by Lisa Chamberlain. In so doing, I was able to more fully describe what a "slacker" of the 1990s was, and thereby define the slacker film and justify my two examples. From here, it was relatively easy to get into the analysis of the films themselves, which was essentially a close reading of the characters' relationships to work, especially as expressed or dealt with by the media they consumed.

### *Fellow Commentary*

Isabella Lloyd-Damnjanovic

In this essay for his writing seminar, Sam does something many writers often forget to do: he defines his operative key terms. Sam's argument on the cultural value of 1990s slacker films relies on a particular understanding of the term "slacker" informed by the historical and cultural context of its era, and before delving into close reading of several slacker film case studies, he takes the time to walk the reader through the term "slacker" by referencing both the definitions used by scholars and colloquial understandings of the word. By defining his key term right off the bat, and thus orienting the reader in the scholarly debate over the origin of the slacker archetype, Sam establishes a strong motive that makes this seemingly whimsical topic a contentious cultural and academic debate.

In the excerpt provided here, Sam begins by offering several explanations for the rise of the "slacker phenomenon" in film: cultural materialism, economic stagnation, and generational apathy. He then mentions several iconic slacker films, noting how they fit into the historical moments in which they were produced. Sam then goes on to his first case study: a comparative close reading of *Clerks* and *Office Space*, two films which he analyzes through close reading of their dialogue and plot elements and a philosophical source on film. What makes Sam's essay so successful is his balance between close textual analysis, engagement with the scholarly conversation, and relevant historical and cultural orienting information. Sam manages to make an argument about the meaning of the slacker film that steps beyond the superficial and challenges the reader to question the cultural meaning behind easily digestible tropes like the "slacker."

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### Bios

**Sam Bollen '18** is an English concentrator from Nashville, Tennessee. He is still struggling with the irony of having worked hard on a paper about slackers. This was his first Junior Paper.

**Isabella Lloyd-Damnjanovic '17** is a senior from Los Angeles, CA and a proud member of the Sociology department and Values and Public Life certificate program. During her time on campus, Isabella has been part of the Women's Mentorship Program's leadership team, a Fellow in the Writing Center, a research assistant for the International Panel on Social Progress, and a member of the USG Princeton Perspective Project student advisory board. She studied abroad in Rome junior spring and is still readjusting to Princeton. She is currently writing her senior thesis on U.S. immigration policy, exploring how differing demographic characteristics impact immigrants' perceptions of the efficacy and justness of immigration policy. She wrote this as a senior.