
Pro Rege

Volume 50
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue*

Article 14

December 2021

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Recommended Citation

Matthews, Joshua (2021) "Review of Idiocracy," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 50: No. 2, 18 - 24.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol50/iss2/14

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Review of *Idiocracy*

Joshua Matthews

Idiocracy contains several movies, despite its short 84-minute run-time. It's a dumb comedy, it's a smart comedy about dumb comedies, it's a counter-cultural dystopian vision, it's a cult favorite, and yet it was a spectacular failure—a low-rated movie among the movie-going masses, and a critical failure among the professional critics. It's also the rare movie that remains highly relevant fourteen years after it was made. It knew, somehow, that we might get a U.S. President who is simultaneously a reality-TV star, a favorite subject of scandalous tabloids, and an inductee into the Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame. It also knew that almost all political discourse in America, perpetuated by almost all politicians, would continue to turn into advertising slogans predicated on vulgar, juvenile speech. Just watch the movie's State-of-the-Union speech. Everyone, I think, will find this apropos to American culture in some way, no matter what they believe about the current President, any recent President, either political party, or the state of modern American culture.

To call *Idiocracy* a “great movie,” as I have here, necessitates a severe caution. Let's acknowledge first that it's a crude movie. Only those who can see through the crudity, in order to spot the classical satire within, ought to watch it. This is not a movie whose depicted behaviors ought to be imitated, even though all movies inspire imitation. It's also dumb, on purpose, as dumb as any \$3 DVD you'll find in Walmart's discount bins. Let's also acknowledge up front that *Idiocracy* has huge flaws, one that almost all other great movies don't have. Its story is thin, and its characters are really thin.

The best parts of *Idiocracy* involve the world it creates. Like other memorable science-fiction movies (e.g., *Blade Runner*, *Star Wars*, *Hellboy 2*), *Idiocracy* asks you to look around in all parts of the frame, soaking in all of the finer details, noticing what's being criticized, parodied, and satirized. Can a movie be great only because its world and backgrounds are exquisitely filled with details so funny and satirical that they feel constantly rel-

evant to life in the 21st century? Let's explore this question, with *Idiocracy* as a test-case.

Idiocracy is a trashy movie that trashes trashy movies. It condemns American and global popular culture's love of the idiotic, the moronic, and the violent. To do so, it takes on the form of the idiotic, the moronic and the violent. If you watch it, expect stupidity galore, which is simultaneously criticized by and glorified by the movie. Because it itself is trashy, *Idiocracy* presents us with a paradox. Should we laugh at it, just as the characters in the movie laugh at the stupid TV show of the future, *Oww My Ballz!?* How should we feel about laughing at this stupid and trashy movie? If we do laugh at it, we seem to join in with the lower-IQ people that this movie, at first glance, mocks.

The movie is a vanity-test of how sophisticated a person thinks of himself or herself. Hate it, and you're one of the snobs that the movie makes fun of. Love it, and you're of the morons that it makes fun of. As you'll see, I think the movie is kindly making fun of the basic, inescapable nature of human beings. Watched in a certain way, *Idiocracy* could be placed among the long-list class of classical satires that offer a strong moral viewpoint based on an entirely negative presentation of a ridiculous world.

When we watch this movie, we understand that the trashy world of the future that it depicts is a negative scenario to be scorned. I think Jonathan Swift would be proud of this movie. Like Swift, *Idiocracy* hates quite a lot about modern human culture, but it has an affection for any particular individual in that culture, no matter how poor, unintelligent, or low-class. Examples abound—Rita, Frito, President Camacho, and even the cross-eyed Secretary of the Interior. All of them are stupid but lovable, the way that the movie wants us to see every human of any intelligence level.

The subgenre of *Idiocracy* is a rare one in classic science fiction: the funny dystopia. Among the more memorable of this kind of story is Cyril Kornbluth's 1951 novella “The Marching Morons.”

Kornbluth imagined a future world, where most of humanity has gotten a lot dumber. (*WALL-E*, which was under development when *Idiocracy* was released, is also a funny dystopia about, in part, the increase in trash and the decline of humanity.) Director Mike Judge takes the same premise as Kornbluth, adding that the reason for the decline in the world's intelligence is based on natural selection and IQ. In the early 21st Century, the movie's opening tells us, the dumbest humans are the ones who had lots of kids, while the smart and elite individuals have no kids.

The result? The narrator in the opening scene tells us frankly: "Darwinian evolution" doesn't care about intelligence, it just cares about survival. Dumb people bred among themselves, and smart people didn't breed at all. Ergo, there will be more and more dumb people in the future. Thus, in the year 2505, "mankind" has devolved into a dis-civilizational state, represented by the transformation of the restaurant "Fuddruckers" into the word that some of us believe we were actually meant to see when we read the word "Fuddruckers."

Our entry point into this future world is Joe Bowers, played by Luke Wilson. He's an everyman who, in the year 2005, is the most average person in the entire United States Army. He selects for a cryogenic freezing experiment, which goes haywire, and so he's inadvertently buried for centuries, only to wake up 500 years later in a city full of morons and trash.

There's a special pun on the word "trash" in this movie. Garbage piles up to skyscraper heights, yes, but the real trash includes the behaviors, the words, the names, the advertising, the TV shows, and the base desires of everyone in the future. Just look around the movie. You can watch this movie ten times and not see everything that it offers. Every surface has advertising on it—the lampshades, hospital walls, the Oval Office, T-shirts, ATMs, and even courtrooms.

And everyone in the movie cites the advertising logos as if they are gospel. For example, in this future world, water has been replaced by a Gatorade-like substance called Brawndo. The advertising slogan for Brawndo is the inane saying, "it's got electrolytes." All of the people in the year 2505 repeat this mantra with no thought attached to it. Nobody has a clue what electrolytes are, and yet Brawndo must be great because it's got the electrolytes that humans crave.

Joe quickly discovers that these people are dumb, really dumb. Everybody in the world has a sub-sub-100 IQ. Since Joe Bowers has a 100 IQ, he, as the smartest person in the world, can fix all of their problems. So says the president of the United States in 2505, Hector Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho. The president's cabinet includes some of the dumbest people imaginable, who think that watering crops with electrolytes is great because, of course, Brawndo has the electrolytes that plants crave.

Idiocracy dares to take on a subject rarely discussed in today's corporate media: the distribution of intelligence across human populations. "Intelligence" is sometimes short-handed as "IQ," the quantified measure of human brain-power. IQ is a touchy subject, even a verboten one, in most public discourse. Yet it's a key subject in the discipline of psychometrics. It's also taken seriously by people who need to boast about themselves, but who otherwise ignore the global consequences of IQ being a valid measure of intelligence. For example, IQ is deployed for one-upmanship whenever a politician of one political party tries to deride an opponent in the other party (e.g., Gore v. Bush; Joe Biden v. anybody). In the early 1990s, everybody made fun of Vice President Dan Quayle for supposedly being stupid, citing his possible low-IQ as a reason for his stupidity. To my knowledge, Quayle didn't have a low IQ, although people enjoyed saying that he did.

As well, IQ seems to correlate—at least a little bit, everyone assumes—with common test scores, such as the ACT, the SAT, and the GRE. According to some psychometricians, the best tests correlate a lot with IQ. And if IQ is at least a semi-legitimate measure, it means that some people are smarter than others, at least smarter in certain ways. (Note: I am not saying that intelligence is wisdom or sound judgment, although for all I know they all might be related.)

But is IQ hereditary? Does it correlate with success in the world? Does it correlate with the technological achievements of higher-IQ cultures? To say "yes" to any of these questions can get a person into social trouble. The science of IQ tends to be taboo, especially in the field of education.

The possibility of a naturally existing hierarchy of intelligence goes against perhaps the largest and most dominant spirit of the age: Egalitarianism. If we believe that everyone is equal, if we want ev-

everyone to be equal, or if we want everyone to be equally able to do anything they want, the notion of IQ would seem to destroy these fanciful dreams. And yet, major corporations and major testing companies and major military operations all depend on intelligence testing, to some degree, to continue their operations. Having worked for one of the testing companies myself, I know that their internal literature can tiptoe around the notion that IQ and test scores can mean or be a reasonable, if incomplete, measure of a person's intelligence. These companies are somewhat afraid of the blasts from the Egalitarian whirlwinds.

But if you read their literature carefully, this is what the testing companies are saying: IQ is a valid measure of intelligence, and its applications are numerous—in education, in the workplace, and in life itself.

There's far more to the IQ tale than that, but *Idiocracy* only needs to deal with that much of it to be a unique movie that overtly discusses that noticing IQs and acting as if they matter is critical to keeping civilization civilized. To begin with, in its opening scenes, *Idiocracy* asserts that many successful high-IQ people have failed in their civilizational duties—specifically, the ones who refuse to have kids of their own. If they don't try to reproduce, while lower-IQ people do, what are the long-term effects on society?

In *Idiocracy*, the successful smart people cede the next generation and future generations to a man named Clevon, who has an 84-IQ. Clevon is a lower-class male with multiple mating partners and dozens of children and evermore dozens of grandchildren. It's his stock that populates the world and helps create the dystopian nightmare that is 2505. Basically, the world is overrun by "trailer trash."

Now, most dystopias are bleak, like George Orwell's *1984*. They're dark, and they're filled with ruined worlds usually dominated by a central dictator. In spite of its stupid humor, *Idiocracy*'s barebones, too, are darker. Its world does have lots of surveillance technology that hounds Joe Bowers throughout the movie. The police arrest Joe twice for idiotic reasons. They spray mace in his face repeatedly, for fun. The president of the United States is a dictator of sorts. At one point, Joe is sentenced to death for failing to please the President.

However, since the tone of *Idiocracy* is a trashy

comedy, it's hard to feel any dystopia here. Its satire masks its bleakness. *Idiocracy* is even darker when you notice how its premise is enabled. Modern medicine keeps Clevon, the dumb scion of the future population of the world, alive—in spite of Clevon's low-IQ that nearly kills him. He's dumb enough to end up in the hospital, but the doctors save him. In effect, *Idiocracy* speculates that modern technology—developed by high-IQ people—could enable the dysgenic decline of humanity.

Moreover, modern medicine caves into the base desires of consumers instead of helping the growing population-IQ problem. Early on, we're told that the decline of civilization was partly caused by corporate-employed doctors who were more interested in solving erectile dysfunction than they were in halting the dysgenic decline of civilization. Initially, then, the higher-IQ people are the ones who cause the dystopia that the movie depicts.

At this point, the movie would seem to be in favor of a lot of things: IQ-testing, higher birth rates among higher-IQ people, and even the disturbing thought that low-IQ people ought not be allowed to reproduce. You'd think, given what I've described, that *Idiocracy* just makes fun of dumb people. No. Instead, it makes fun of us—everybody. Note already, in the movie's opening, that it spreads out its scorn. It's not just dumb people who deserve mockery; it's the so-called smart people, too, who have enabled the moronic world of 2505. Also, Mike Judge, the movie's director, is the master at telling us that we're all dumb in our own ways, even the people who know that they are very intelligent. And he repeatedly points out, here and in his other work (*Beavis and Butthead*; *Office Space*; *King of the Hill*), that we all like dumb stuff, including his own art.

This movie is not beholden to any political ideology, though. It's not necessarily in favor of progressivism, conservatism, or any other "ism." And it actually cares about the plight of the lower classes. Yes, though it might be hard to spot, *Idiocracy* cares about the dumb people it seems to make fun of.

Note who else is a target of *Idiocracy*'s classical satire besides the morons of the future. It skewers high-IQ progressives who don't reproduce. It makes fun of the American government. It makes fun of the military. It makes fun of giant corporations, and in fact it repeatedly points out the ne-

farious overlaps between those corporations and the federal government. In fact, I think it ends up telling us to watch out for and appreciate low-IQ people because they are human beings. Yes, it does tell us that we don't want the most moronic elements of our culture—reality-TV, irrational advertising, slapstick entertainment, etc.—to dominate civilization. But I'm not sure it doesn't also condescend totally to those moronic elements either.

In my view, what makes this movie re-watchable, why I think I can call it "great," is that it is close to a documentary. It offers a speculative vision that nevertheless closely correlates with our reality. For the vast majority of the media-centric culture we engage with is *Idiocracy*-like.

Idiocracy is partly about the ubiquity of irrational advertising and its cultural effects. The movie is also about tabloid journalism, pro-wrestling discourse in politics, reality-TV dramas, and an American corporate-media establishment that unequivocally caters to base human desires. *Idiocracy* lets all these trashier elements of our civilization run amok. If I turn on a cable-news network today, or if I log into Facebook, *Idiocracy* is what I will see. Any Youtube comments section will suffice to show that our world is an idiocracy already.

For years, we've seen reality-TV stars make porn tapes, and then make lots of money off of being famous just for the sake of being famous. Or, porn stars who become famous and respectable for no logical reason. *Idiocracy* knows this and makes fun of it. We also see stupidity and irrationality all over the place, on social media and on TV. Stupidity is even praised by those who support the stupid and irrational. *Idiocracy* knows this and makes fun of it. We see sex and violence glorified in all forms of media. And the news media, as you should know by now, has become mere entertainment. In general, the media profits off of scandals and violence, and so it stirs them up and perpetuates them. Again, *Idiocracy* shows us this, and gets us to think about it.

So what are the real differences between our own world and *Idiocracy's* movie-world of 2505? Not too much, I submit. Perhaps the only difference is the exaggerated nature of the movie world. Today, we have smarter people, supposedly. The average IQ is 100 today, and yet it is near 80 in the year 2505 in the movie. But that's about it.

Look at the year 2505 in *Idiocracy*. What are its arts and culture? They're based on today's advertising, reality TV, and media circuses. The movie seems to present us with a question: what would the world look like if everything were dominated by the dumber parts of our culture? However, *Idiocracy* points out, rather strongly, that the dumber parts of our culture are already dominating us!

For example, the main TV news network in the movie is called the "Violence News Network," which is a more honest label for any current 24-hour cable news networks.

Most interestingly, or disturbingly, sex has become part of every aspect of the culture. It's taken over Starbucks, Fox News, and the major magazines. Everything is sexualized, and sex is everything to the morons in 2505. For them, sex and bodily functions are always big jokes that must be a part of art, commerce, and politics.

As good science fiction usually does, *Idiocracy* predicts the future, lightly, while really pointing us to our own present dilemmas. Look for example at the Costco scene in the movie. The enormity of the Costco store, a vast warehouse that's miles long, sprawling across a garbage-filled city, is sadly hilarious. Who hasn't been to Costco and felt the absolute enormity of its inhuman warehouse? Those stores, to me at least, seem designed to make humans feel like rats in a maze, consumers buying everything in bulk like pigs at the trough.

And in one of the best scenes, if not the best scene, *Idiocracy* presents us with a vision of what our own political landscape looks like. We see President Camacho giving a State-of-the-Union address in the House of Representatives, which has been turned into an arena for globally-televised entertainment, and entertainment only. Nothing intelligent or logical is said at this address.

When President Camacho enters, he dances and struts to music with a heavy beat. Later, he fires off an automatic rifle. While the movie exaggerates, don't our own politicians perform for crowds when they give campaign speeches, while the audience cheers for them? Why else are our actors in America great at politics, if being a politician is not mostly being a good actor? Camacho's performance is only an exaggeration of what we already experience today, where 95% of our political wranglings in the media are pure theater, most

of it of the caliber of juvenile discourse. While Camacho himself is sadly hilarious, he's a stand-in for the current office of the President, not just the particular President you despise. I imagine that people watching this movie today, in 2019, see Donald Trump in Camacho. Maybe, but the movie was released during the Bush Jr presidency, and became a cult hit during Obama's. *Idiocracy* speaks to any recent Presidential era.

During the last twenty years, most of us (hopefully) have learned that ALL news media is entertainment first, second, third, and last. The spread of the moniker "fake news" is a hopeful sign that this truism is being widely recognized. We've learned during these years—and some of us might still not have grasped the consequences of it—that all corporate media companies are businesses run for profit first, with heavy advertising that contains the kinds of slogans found all over *Idiocracy*. By nature, these media companies benefit off controversy, stupidity, violence, and anything else that can capture the attention of the public. Attention means money. At his speech, Camacho says a lot while saying nothing. He then promises that Joe Bowers will fix all of America's problems in one week. If Joe doesn't do this, then great entertainment will ensue, of the monster-truck/pro-wrestling/cable-news variety.

Idiocracy predicts all the bread and circuses of the last sixteen years in America. No matter what political party is in power, we've experienced the juvenility of this scene over and over again. Everything in politics seems fake, or so it seems. While this might be called a cynical view, it's a safer assumption than believing that what we see on TV from politicians is real. It's fairly easy to notice the similarities between our 21st-century world and the advertisement-inundated world of the movie. The Brawndo corporation owns the FCC and the FDA; thus it can do whatever it wants, politically. Carl's Jr. owns the ATMs. The hospitals are in total disarray, to put it mildly. In *Idiocracy*, everything is marketing, and so everything has degenerated. This is funny, but it's serious. That's classical satire for you. You laugh at the thing you know needs to be corrected or avoided.

One of the movie's other major points is that few today understand anything about sex and its consequences. The progressive couple at the beginning of the movie hesitate to have kids because

they want a good career. Because they don't have kids, they enable the dystopia depicted in this movie. They think and act as if reproduction and sex are not linked. And yet, the dumbest people in *Idiocracy* just think sex is a big joke, and that's it. All the morons joke again and again about sex, and we are not supposed to laugh at their jokes, but we are supposed to laugh at their stupidity at laughing at those jokes. Sex is taken too lightly by Clevon, who does it with just about anything that moves. Meanwhile, the movie's hero, Joe Bowers, can't figure out that Rita is a prostitute. He's clueless about her sexual past. He doesn't seem to know much of anything about sex.

The movie's criticism, I think, is that few people if any have the proper notion of sex as something apart from business and advertising, something that does involve the serious consequences of reproduction, and that sex has important consequences for not just the near-term (i.e., the next two decades) but the long-term (i.e., hundreds of years from now). If we thought of sex and reproduction as acts that will change the world forever, would our behaviors change? Probably.

The only problem—and it's a big one—is that we are human, and sex is a very short-term preferential choice that normally excludes long-term views. In other words, by nature, *Idiocracy* says, we are just stupid about sex. It gives us immediate pleasure, and we can't think much past that immediacy. Unless we have a high-IQ, in which case we are still likely to act for the sake of immediate gratifications. In the movie, the smart people rationalize their desires, not having children when they could.

Although *Idiocracy* has no political ideology per se, it is not anarchic. As a classical satire, it tries to point us to the way out of the problems it's picking at. Watched carefully, we see what it diagnoses as our dilemmas: advertising that is mere persuasion, politics that is only entertainment, and cultural stupidity run amok.

What do we do about this? As in the case of Jonathan Swift's on satire, *Idiocracy's* answers are vague, which might be a serious flaw. If the end of the movie is viewed with bleak eyes, the final idea of *Idiocracy* is that no one and nothing can stop the dysgenic decline of humanity. Joe, who in the end has become President, has three babies with Rita the prostitute; and yet Frito, Joe's really dumb lawyer-friend, has dozens of babies with multiple

women. The movie says that dysgenic decline will keep happening, and it will affect our political scene. In one sense, this might lead to despair.

Another way to look at the ending, though, is that stupidity has always reigned, no matter what. There's no need to worry about the future or the present. Life goes on as it has, with stupid people heavily involved in politics.

Contrary to the corporate media, who would have its viewers worry about everything in order to keep them hyped up and watching the news, the tone of the final shots of *Idiocracy* are laid-back, telling us not to worry. Things might get dumber in the future, but maybe, in most places, things have always been dumber.

I'd like to think that Mike Judge, at the end of *Idiocracy*, is referring us back to the end of his most famous movie, *Office Space*. In that movie, there's a way out of the oppression of modern life: hard work, enjoyable labor, conversation with friends—almost a Virgilian vision of the good life (captured best in Virgil's *Georgics*). These are possible answers to the threat of an *Idiocracy*-future that is unavoidable.

What should we make of this movie, then, as a trashy movie itself? The category of "the stupid" in art criticism has been mostly avoided, except to deride the stupid. Not even in pop-culture analysis or modern criticism is "the stupid" addressed as a valid category, since usually in those realms, everything is treated as analyzable and thus inherently complex and interesting.

Yet *Idiocracy* is stupid, undeniably so, and on purpose. It's asking critics to assess what the place of "the stupid" is in art, and if it should have a place at all. This is a really interesting question, one that reflexively challenges any viewer of the movie to wait before condescendingly judging the movie as stupid.

Nearly every person I've ever met, including the most brilliant and the most urbane, have admired something that is nonsensical, stupid, or both. Everybody has the trash-art that they like. You might not like *Idiocracy* in the end, or my praise of it. I expect no one to appreciate this movie, and I'd feel kind of bad if anybody ended up liking this movie because of this essay. We should, I agree completely, like movies that are better than this. But we know that we are surrounded by the stupid. We deal with it constantly—on the Internet, on TV, on our phones. Face the truth:

99.5% of Youtube is stupid.

Now consider science-fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon's famous dictum: 90% of everything made is junk. That includes all art and all writing. It turns out that Sturgeon was wrong. The number is higher, closer to 96%.

In the realms of human endeavor, most art is not only not good, it is the equivalent of a brain-fart, not far from the popular movie "Ass" that's featured in *Idiocracy*. That includes operas and paintings, as well as movies and comic books.

For art critics, it's pointless to only dismiss the stupid as stupid. First, we have to get into why something is stupid, if it is. Second, we have to deal with the ever-present popularity of much that is and will be stupid, thinking about its social, religious, and political influences. Third, we know that everyone, including ourselves, acts stupid or appreciates stupidity, at least at times. And that's no matter what our IQ is.

My point is that "the stupid" is a valid critical and aesthetic category that needs diagnosing. *Idiocracy* requires critics to think hard about this. I offer this idea: a whole book on "the stupid" for the philosophy of aesthetics, or the history of aesthetics. It's waiting to be written if anyone is up for the challenge. It could even offer a fun academic career.

Let's even get more complex. By "stupid" I really mean two things: the ignorant and the really stupid. *Idiocracy* showcases both. Joe, mostly, is ignorant. Everybody else in 2505 is really stupid. Of the ignorant, that of course means uneducated. Of the really stupid, that can be defined as knowledge with a failure, maybe a complete failure, to comprehend that knowledge. And we aren't just talking about scientific or practical knowledge. This can include morality as well.

For his entire career, Mike Judge as an artist hits us hard on these questions of how to portray, in art, ignorance and stupidity. He's done it in every one of his works—again, *Beavis and Butthead*, *Office Space*, *King of the Hill*, *Extract*. A good artist probably will want to portray stupidity in all its complexity, which is a paradox. You wouldn't want to condescend or dismiss stupid people; otherwise, you look like both a propagandist and a snob. Sure, if you do this, some people will join your side and laugh with you. But to only make fun of lower-class morons in a work of art—like a lot of Hollywood movies have done over the

decades—is to think as stupidly as the people you are mocking. Narrowness is stupidity of a kind, and yet Mike Judge never wants us to think too narrowly about the lower classes, rural Americans, or low-IQ people.

One thing that *Idiocracy* shows us is that members of our family will probably be one or both of these, that is, ignorant and/or stupid. As humans, we can't avoid either one. Most likely, we will be seen as stupid by people we know and love. And as human creators, reflecting in our art that stupidity is a major element of our lives, we have to showcase ignorance and stupidity in a way that displays the insane problems that they cause, but that also shows others that we ourselves have problems with ignorance and stupidity, too. We're all humans, and even the highest IQ person does and likes stupid things. So says Mike Judge. *Idiocracy* gets at this complex tone pretty well: one of dismissing and criticizing but also loving the stupid people of the world.

I never get the feeling that Mike Judge hates anybody in this movie. We laugh at the dumbness of the morons in 2505, yes, but I end up feeling compassion for everybody in the movie. Well, ex-

cept the progressives who don't reproduce at the beginning.

So I would like to nominate *Idiocracy* as the best documentary of the 21st century. Even though I would just like to laugh with scorn at everything in this movie, upon reflection, when I see the lower-class people in this movie, whom I've seen repeatedly in small towns, in big cities, in colleges, they are all people, who deserve charity—because Judge's work tells me, finally, that I am in a lot of ways just like them.

Let *Idiocracy* serve as a warning to us all about dysgenic possibility of the decline of civilization and about the takeover of trashy arts and culture. Let it, at the same time, remind us of our vain ability to think and act condescendingly to lower-IQ people, who yet share the same nature, drives, desires, and bodily experiences.

Maybe *Idiocracy* is egalitarian, after all. All races, genders, and any other human identity marker don't change one fact: that we all share a nature that must deal with its own stupidity at times. And not only that, we have a nature—all of us—that is stupid and yet lovable, at least at times.