

POP CULTURE Only a Wasteland?

With all its sound and fury, the debate over the state of American popular culture is beginning to resemble one of television's high-squawk talk shows: Love it or loathe it, we're told. But it's not that simple. America's movies, music, and TV programs are full of both degrading sex and violence and extraordinary creative vitality. Our two critics draw on the perspective of history to sort through what's right with pop culture and what's wrong with it—and why.

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The Art in the Popular

by Paul A. Cantor

“I remember, in the course of making *Speed*, I learned *Hamlet*,” says Reeves. What does that tell us about *Speed*? “It ain’t Shakespeare.”

—Interview with Keanu Reeves, *Rolling Stone*

I have just finished writing a book titled *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization*. That may not sound so odd, until I reveal how I have spent the rest of my life. Most of my scholarly career has been devoted to Shakespeare, about whom I have published 15 essays and three books, including the volume on *Hamlet* in the Cambridge University Press *Landmarks of World Literature* series. I have also published extensively on Romantic literature, and even when I have written on contemporary subjects, I have dealt with authors generally regarded as both serious and complex, such as J. M. Coetzee, Don DeLillo, and Salman Rushdie. In my teaching, I have always been a staunch champion of what is usually called the Western canon. I began my career in the old General Education program at Harvard with a course on myths of creation, and at the University of Virginia today I regularly teach the introductory comparative literature survey, which begins with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and runs through all the traditional great authors, such as Virgil, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Austen, and Dostoevsky.

With these credentials, why am I now writing about *Gilligan's Island* and *Star Trek*? I could simply say that everyone needs to relax and have a little fun once in a while. But in truth, I hope to show that we can learn something from American popular culture, especially if we study it with the same care we have learned to bring to the analysis of traditional literary masterpieces. And perhaps the serious study of popular culture might have a genuine pedagogical value. I am not one of those misguided optimists who think that television (or any other technological development, such as the Internet) is the answer to all our educational problems. In fact, I am as appalled as anybody at what television appears to be doing to our young. Every year, it seems, I



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Shakespeare's immortality has rarely been more sorely tested than it was by episode 72 of Gilligan's Island, in which the dimwitted castaways performed a musical version of Hamlet.

watch the attention span of my students shorten and their ability to read the complex language of older literature diminish. I do what I can to combat these trends, but there is something to be said for a strategy of "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." Given that we are now forced to live with television—proposals to ban it have not generated much support—we might as well search for ways to turn it to some good use, even if its overall influence on students remains deleterious.

If my students seem to be totally immersed in popular culture, I try to meet them halfway—not surrendering completely to the world of the media, but using it to help my students understand the world of high culture that is supposedly so remote from their experience. For example, when I discuss the centrally important theme of vengeance in the *Iliad* or the *Oresteia*, I relate it to modern forms of revenge tragedy, westerns such as *The Searchers* or *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, or gangster movies such as the *Godfather* films or *Goodfellas*. John Ford's *The Searchers* is positively Aeschylean in the way it uses the theme of revenge to explore the complex and ever shifting boundary between civilization and barbarism. I show my students that if they have seen *The Godfather*, they already know something about the tension between law and justice, which is such an important issue in Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. My new book culminates in a discussion of one of the most bizarre hours of television ever broadcast, the "Home" episode of *The X-Files*. Though clearly an exercise in American Gothic, this grim tale of incest and infanticide harks back to the origins of Western drama, and, like Greek tragedy, pits the primal power of the family against the civilizing power of the community and its broader standard of justice.

Getting our students to “read” popular cultural critically may well become our task as teachers in an age increasingly dominated by the mass media. If students can learn to reflect on what they view in movies or on television, the process may eventually make them better readers of literature. The many critics of popular culture, who adamantly oppose its inclusion in the college curriculum, fear that studying it inevitably involves dragging what has traditionally been regarded as high culture down to the same level. This is a legitimate concern and should caution us against any easy embrace of popular culture or surrender to its cheap thrills and superficial charms. But that is not to say that no embrace is possible. By being selective and rigorously analytical, one may be able to lift popular culture up to the level of high culture, or at least pull it in that direction.

The process of beginning with popular culture and attempting to ascend from it to higher levels of reflection has a name: the Socratic method. I am not talking about the parody of the Socratic method used by law professors and other academics, but the real thing—the philosophic procedure Plato shows Socrates pursuing in dialogue after dialogue. In the most philosophically autobiographical passage Plato ascribes to his teacher, Socrates explains in the *Phaedo* (96a-100a) that he became disillusioned with what we would call scientific attempts to understand the universe in terms of material causes. So he decided to turn from the study of the heavens to the study of human things, and that meant studying the accounts of the universe people give when they speak to each other in the city. For Socrates, what human beings *say* about their world is the best starting point for philosophy, and his aim, as Plato shows, is always to move in the direction of true knowledge from the confused and contradictory opinions people commonly express about the most important subjects, such as justice and the good. Socrates recounts in the *Apology* (22b-c) that among the most important people in Athens he interrogated were the poets, because, as becomes clear in several Platonic dialogues, the poets both reflect and help shape popular opinion on wisdom, piety, and other virtues. Poetry in its various forms, including drama, was the popular culture of ancient Greece. As Plato makes clear in the *Republic*, Homer was the educator of the whole Greek world, and the theater in Athens was a civic institution, the center of religious festivals for which much of the city’s population regularly turned out. Thus, when Plato portrays Socrates, directly or indirectly, in conversation with the poets, he is showing him beginning his philosophic ascent from what we call popular culture.

I can hear the howls of protest: “You’re comparing a TV critic talking about *Gilligan’s Island* to Socrates discussing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: Shame on you!” It no doubt tells us something about the astoundingly high cultural level

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of fifth-century B.C. Athens that authors such as Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes were genuinely popular in the city and attracted large crowds to public performances of their work (including recitations from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). Ancient Greek literature has become our epitome of high culture, the touchstone by which we judge all later authors. But let us not forget that the Greek culture that looks so elevated to us today looked debased to many of its most intelligent contemporaries—precisely because it was popular, and hence seemed in many respects vulgar. Plato was no partisan of ancient Greek culture. Indeed, he was its harshest critic. And his criticism might help us rethink our conception of the Greek cultural world, and perhaps our concep-

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tion of culture in general. Time and the changes it has wrought have distorted our view of ancient Greece. Our image of the chaste beauty of a temple such as the Parthenon is shaped by the fact that the bright colors with which it was originally painted have long since faded. If we could be magically transported to the Acropolis as it existed in Socrates' day, we might well comment on how "unclassical" and even garish its color scheme looked to us. Similarly, if we could see a fifth-century B.C. performance of a Greek tragedy, we might well be shocked by its "operatic" quality. The dionysian element in the staging—all the music and the dancing—might well overwhelm us, as it evidently did the ancient audiences, according to the few contemporary accounts of performances that have survived. Especially since the 18th-century German art historian Johann Winckelmann, we have tended to think of Greek culture in terms of restraint, dignity, and repose. But as cultural revisionists since Nietzsche have been reminding us, the ancient Greeks were a Mediterranean people, with powerful emotions and a need to express them in their art. Characters in Homer weep uncontrollably, and they rage with even less restraint. Ancient Greek literature was much closer to the immoderation and emotional excess of modern popular culture than its champions today would like to think.

Our view of ancient Greek literature might be quite different if we had more of it. Only a fraction of the output of the Greek tragedians has survived, some 33 of an estimated 1,000 tragedies produced in fifth-century B.C. Athens. The carnage of comedies was even greater: of the presumably vast world of Athenian Old Comedy, only 11 plays by Aristophanes survive. Some element of accident was no doubt at work in determining which plays survived, but on the whole we

have every reason to believe that a process of canon formation was taking place. The ancient world gradually sifted out the best playwrights, and generally chose their best works to preserve. We do not pick up the *Poetics* and find Aristotle saying, to our dismay, “Sophocles was a good dramatist, but he was no Agathon,” or “I like *Oedipus tyrannos*, but the other plays in the trilogy are much better.” Of course, there is a risk of circular reasoning here. *Oedipus tyrannos* may have been preserved partly because Aristotle praised it, and we might in fact prefer one of Sophocles’ lost plays if we could but see it. No doubt much of value in Greek drama has been lost. Having read *Prometheus Bound*, who would not wish to have the rest of Aeschylus’s trilogy on the Titan? Still, on balance we seem to have a fair selection of the best of Greek tragedy in the texts that have come down to us, and all the authorities we have agree that Aristophanes was the greatest of the Greek comedians.

But that is precisely the problem. We have an idealized view of Greek drama because only the best works have survived. If we had the works of a playwright such as Agathon, we would have a broader sense of what culture in ancient Athens was like. We might then realize how “popular” it really was, and have a better idea of why astute contemporaries such as Plato were so critical of Greek drama. In short, Greek culture was a much more mixed phenomenon than we tend to think today, and embraced the high and the low. From all the evidence we have, the

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Athenian public was basically indiscriminate about culture, in just the way mass audiences often are. Sometimes great playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides won in the public contests that were at the heart of dramatic production in Athens, but often

they lost, and not just to each other. The records show that they were repeatedly beaten by dramatists who have long since been forgotten, presumably with just cause. Much as is the situation with the Academy Awards today, the Athenian drama judges sometimes rewarded true artistic quality, and sometimes did just the opposite. Aristophanes revised his comedy *The Clouds* after he suffered the humiliation of seeing it finish last in the competition for which he originally wrote it. In the text of the play that has come down to us, he has the chorus berate the audience for failing to appreciate the “wisest” of his comedies, and he complains bitterly about being “worsted by vulgar men” at the first contest. Plato has left his indirect comment on Athenian drama contests in his *Symposium*, a dialogue that takes place during a drinking party to celebrate Agathon’s having won first prize with his first tragedy. When Agathon gets up to speak in praise of love, Plato exposes him as a shallow thinker, chiefly interested in showing off and dazzling his audience with cheap rhetorical tricks. Agathon wins the applause



Life in Plato's Academy, as imagined in a first-century A.D. mosaic in the Roman town of Pompeii.

of the dinner party, much as he won the drama contest, but within moments Socrates is able to make intellectual mincemeat of him by asking a few questions that reveal the hollowness of his rhetoric. "So much for the Academy Award-winning tragedian of Athens," Plato seems to be saying.

In general, Plato shows Socrates puncturing the pretensions of the chief representatives of Athenian popular culture in his day. In the dialogue called the *Ion*, Socrates interrogates a rhapsode of that name, one of the performers who made a living from public recitations of Homer's poetry. According to the dialogue, rhapsodes such as Ion attracted huge audiences and drove them into an emotional frenzy; these performers had something of the status of rock stars today. Socrates leads Ion to reveal that, puffed up by the adulation of the crowds who throng to hear him recite Homer, he has developed an inflated sense of his own importance. Considering himself an expert on Homer, he has come to believe that he is also an expert on all the subjects Homer deals with in his poetry. Socrates eventually gets the little fool to claim that he would make the best general in the whole Greek world because he recites the military passages in Homer so beautifully. He should remind us of the movie stars in our day who flock to Washington to testify on matters of national security at congressional hearings: "I'm not a general, but I play one on TV." With his typical insight, Socrates sees right into the depths

Popular Culture

of Ion's soul (shallow as he is) and leads him to reveal his true motives as he looks out at his audience:

I look down upon them from the platform and see them at such moments crying and turning awestruck eyes upon me and yielding to the amazement of my tale. For I have to pay the closest attention to them, since, if I set them crying, I shall laugh myself because of the money I take, but if they laugh, I myself shall cry because of the money I lose. (translation by W. R. M. Lamb)

Ion truly is a pop star. Far from possessing the art of generalship, he turns out to be mainly concerned with the art of moneymaking. And he earns his money by giving his audience what it wants—an emotional high from the more dazzling passages in Homer's poetry.

The *Ion* shows how deep Plato's critique of Athenian culture goes. It is one thing to be reminded that in addition to the great authors we revere today, such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, Athens was filled with pretenders such as Agathon and Ion, second- and third-raters who had no artistic depth and were basically in the business for the fame and the money. But in the case of Ion, Plato shows us something more: What we think of as the great artistic achievements of ancient Greece were transformed as they became part of the popular culture of their day. The Athenians did not study the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in universities as we do today. They did not pour over the epics with learned professors and scholarly commentaries to guide them, to point out the artistic shape of the poems or the subtlety of their details (all that came later, in the Alexandrian period of Greek culture). Indeed, by and large the Athenians did not *read* Homer at all. They heard his poems recited, often in huge crowds with performers paid well to make them sound as exciting as possible. In short, the Homer of Athenian popular culture was not "our" Homer, the Homer of Great Books courses. He was "packaged" for Athenian audiences by a kind of entertainment industry, much the way Shakespeare is for mass audiences today—and with the same inevitable distortions.

Viewers of a movie version of a Shakespeare play rarely get its text complete. Often, by the time the director is finished updating and adapting the play to the screen—adding music, rearranging scenes, transposing the setting, and so on—little remains of the original work. What should be the occasion for thoughtful reflection on the human condition is turned into just another Hollywood movie, sometimes even an action/adventure flick (such as the Mel Gibson *Hamlet*, which some of my students referred to as *Lethal Bodkin*), and almost always in a form that emphasizes emotion at the expense of dramatic logic. For example, Baz Luhrmann's version of *Romeo and Juliet* turned the play into what amounted to a series of MTV videos, and was so geared to the teenage market that at the time I proposed renaming it *Saved by the Bell: The Renaissance Years*.

The *Ion* reminds us of the distinction between the actual monuments of high culture and the way they may be received once they enter the realm of popular culture, and it points us toward the crucial role of the cultural intermediaries who translate high culture into popular. Plato's *Ion* is the Dino DeLaurentiis of his day, making the story of Odysseus attractive to a mass

The Simpsons' America

By dealing centrally with the family, *The Simpsons* takes up real human issues everybody can recognize and thus ends up in many respects less “cartoonish” than other television programs. Its cartoon characters are more human, more fully rounded, than the supposedly real human beings in many situation comedies. Above all, the show has created a believable human community: Springfield, USA. . . .

Springfield is decidedly an American small town. In several episodes, it is contrasted with Capital City, a metropolis the Simpsons approach with fear and trepidation. Obviously the show makes fun of small-town life—it makes fun of everything—but it simultaneously celebrates the virtues of the traditional American small town. One of the principal reasons why the dysfunctional Simpson family functions as well as it does is that [its members] live in a traditional American small town. The institutions that govern their lives are not remote from them or alien to them. The Simpson children go to a neighborhood school (though they are bussed to it by the ex-hippie driver Otto). Their friends in school are largely the same as their friends in their neighborhood. The Simpsons are not confronted by an elaborate, unapproachable, and uncaring education bureaucracy. Principal Skinner and Mrs. Krabappel may not be perfect educators, but when Homer and Marge need to talk to them, they are readily accessible. The same is true of the Springfield police force. Chief Wiggum is not a great crime-fighter, but he is well-known to the citizens of Springfield, as they are to him. The police in Springfield still have neighborhood beats and have even been known to share a donut or two with Homer. . . .

The overall tendency of *The Simpsons* is to present Springfield as a kind of classical polis; it is just about as self-contained and autonomous as a community can be in the modern world. This once again reflects the postmodern nostalgia of *The Simpsons*: With its self-conscious recreation of the 1950s sitcom, it ends up weirdly celebrating the old ideal of small-town America. I do not mean to deny that the first impulse of *The Simpsons* is to make fun of small-town life. But in that very process, it reminds us of what the old ideal was and what was so attractive about it, above all the fact that average Americans somehow felt in touch with the forces that influenced their lives and maybe even controlled them.

In a presentation before the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 12, 1991 (broadcast on C-SPAN), series creator Matt Groening said that the subtext of *The Simpsons* is: “The people in power don’t always have your best interests in mind.” This is a view of politics that cuts across the normal distinctions between Left and Right and explains why the show can be relatively evenhanded in its treatment of both political parties and has something to offer to both liberals and conservatives. *The Simpsons* is based on distrust of power, and especially of power remote from ordinary people. The show celebrates genuine community, a community in which everybody more or less knows everybody else (even if they do not necessarily like each other). By recreating this older sense of community, the show manages to generate a kind of warmth out of its postmodern coolness, a warmth that is largely responsible for its success with the American public. This view of community may be the most profound comment *The Simpsons* has to make on family life in particular and politics in general in America today. No matter how dysfunctional it may seem, the nuclear family is an institution worth preserving. And the way to preserve it is not by the offices of a distant, supposedly expert, therapeutic state, but by restoring its links to a series of local institutions, which reflect and foster the same principle that makes the Simpson family itself work—the attachment to one’s own, the principle that we best care for something when it belongs to us.

—Paul Cantor

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audience. He serves up a form of Homer-lite—a stripped-down, jazzed-up menu of excerpts—and in the process he loses the soul of the great epics. The *Ion* helps explain the seemingly puzzling fact that Plato has Socrates criticize Homer so vehemently. Socrates is criticizing not so much the Homer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as the Homer of *Ion*, Homer repackaged for a mass audience by a clever merchandiser. As staged by *Ion*, Homer's texts become occasions not for studied contemplation but for emotional indulgence—and that, evidently, is the way Athenian audiences liked their Homer.

Plato thus helps us to distinguish two levels of popular culture. On the one hand, there are the merely popular artists such as Agathon, who care for nothing but popularity. They flatter their audience to gain its approval, giving it only what it wants to hear. To maintain their popularity, these poets remain within the audience's horizon of opinions, never challenging its beliefs but, rather, reinforcing them. They lend the prestige of their art to common opinion, casting an aesthetic enchantment over the most ordinary ideas and making them look beautiful. Such poets differ from other holders of conventional opinion only by the skill with which they can formulate it (think of Alexander Pope's line: "What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed"). On the other hand, though this point is no doubt controversial, I believe that Plato was willing to acknowledge that some poets, even though popular, might possess a genuine form of wisdom. He makes fun of Agathon's pretensions in the *Symposium*, but he gives the comic poet Aristophanes a brilliant and moving speech, one that anticipates the view of love Socrates himself ultimately develops in the dialogue. I believe that Plato could discriminate between a crowd pleaser and a poet who is more than merely popular. The greatest of poets may be able to see beyond the limited horizons of their community and offer a critique of its conventions. But this critique will be largely lost on the public, who, even if they choose to embrace unconventional poetry, will tend to assimilate it into the conventional notions they already hold.

Thus, from the community's standpoint, in many respects it does not matter whether a poet is genuinely wise or not—if his wisdom will inevitably be diluted and distorted in the process of being made popular. Homer may be the wisest man who ever lived, but Plato suggests that if his thoughts reach the public only through a cultural intermediary such as *Ion*, their effect will be debased. If the fate of Socrates taught Plato anything, it was the profound tension between thoughtfulness and "popularity." Plato was deeply suspicious of any idea that had been packaged for communal consumption. He was, in effect, the first critic of popular culture, and precisely for its "popularity." That is the basis of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry Plato has Socrates speak of in the *Republic* (607b-c), and that is why when Plato shows Socrates trying to work his way up from common opinion, he often depicts him beginning with the poets. Plato may have had a low opinion of what we call popular culture, but he recognized its importance in shaping common opinion—and thus, in shaping the political community.

I have dwelled at length on Plato's critique of the poets in the hope of shaking up my readers with the thought that the artistic world that serves today as our paradigm of high culture was once viewed as popular culture, and indeed condemned as such by perhaps the most intel-

lignant and perceptive thinker of his day. Plato's critique of the Greek poets ought to sound very familiar to us. He has Socrates accuse Greek poets of inflaming the passions of their audiences, and in particular of inciting them to violent behavior and unleashing their lusts. At various points, particularly in the *Republic*, Socrates argues that the poets teach improper and even impious ideas about the gods, and undermine the authority and stability of the political community. Spelled out this way, Plato's critique of the poets sounds uncannily like the litany of complaints conservative critics make about American popular culture today, especially about television programs. One is forced to wonder: If the critics who hold up classical culture as their model today had lived in fifth-century B.C. Athens, would they have been singing the praises of Homer and Greek tragedy? Or would they have rejected the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as too violent and, like Plato, viewed Greek tragedy as a symptom of cultural decadence (in particular the work of that most subversive of playwrights, Euripides)? What would our cultural traditionalists have made of Aristophanes if they had been forced to live as his contemporaries? (And perhaps more interesting, what would he have made of them?) Aristophanes' comedies set standards of obscenity that have never been equaled, let alone surpassed (and no English translation comes close to doing justice to the sustained anatomical vulgarity of their double-entendre).

It is no use countering that Aristophanes was a serious and profound critic of Athens (which I believe he was), and that his obscenity was merely a concession to the demands of his audience. Plato's critique concentrates on the effect the Greek poets had on their audience. It brackets out the question of whether their works had any deeper meaning in favor of asking how they were actually received as they entered popular culture. After all, critics of contemporary popular culture are always talking about its effects and not about any hidden meanings. If they want to exonerate Aristophanes on charges of obscenity because his plays had a deeper purpose, they need to ask whether the contemporary works they condemn might also have some purpose other than just titillating their audiences. Of course, much obscene art in the contemporary world may in fact be just obscene, with none of the famous "redeeming social value" it is supposed to have. But the fact that works we now regard as classics were once regarded as obscene should give us pause, and we might at least be willing to think twice before rejecting contemporary popular culture without a fair hearing.

Plato's critique of the poets is useful for reminding us how complex a living culture is. It does not divide up neatly into high and low art, into works that are clearly classic and works that are merely popular. Some of the greatest works of art (including Shakespeare's plays) were popular in their own day, and as Aristophanes' comedies attest, they may present a puzzling mixture of the high and the low (Shakespeare was known to come up with an obscene pun or two himself). We are often tempted to think that Plato did not understand art because he appears to condemn it, but in fact he develops a deep understanding of art and artists in his dialogues, especially the *Symposium*. He



Scully (Gillian Anderson) and Mulder (David Duchovny) shine yet another of their signature shaky flashlights into yet another of The X-Files' signature dark corners.

shows that the highest flights of the human imagination may be strangely linked to the lowest impulses of the soul. Thus, any culture offers a truly problematic whole, a strange circulation of artistic energies, in which what we sometimes simplistically try to separate as the classic and the popular elements mix and interpenetrate in surprising ways.

Plato should prompt us, when we look at our own culture, to look high *and* low to appreciate its full achievement. The lasting cultural accomplishments of our age may not always be conveniently where we expect to find them, based on past experience and our ingrained assumptions about what constitutes true art. To be sure, we probably will not go far wrong if we expect that most of American popular culture will turn out upon closer inspection to be more or less mindless entertainment after all. But sometimes genuine art may masquerade as mindless entertainment. Careful analysis of Plato's critique of the poets suggests that we cannot dismiss a work simply because an audience reacts to it in emotional and irrational ways. We must always be alert to the possibility that even in the most conventional venues of popular culture — television, for example — genuine artists may find means to sneak in under the audience's radar to present unconventional ideas in ways that are acceptable and even entertaining to a mass audience. Classic works of art do not always carry a neat label informing us: "This

is one for the ages.” They may at first be hard to distinguish from the common fare of their day. A wacky and obscene comedy such as Aristophanes’ *The Birds* may turn out to embody a profound understanding of the Athenian polis and its imperial aspirations. And, as I argue in my new book, an apparently bizarre sci-fi series such as *The X-Files* may have much to tell us about the American nation-state (and its imperial aspirations). Cultural history is full of surprises, and we should take pleasure in its unpredictability.

Plato encourages us to study popular culture carefully. He has Socrates interrogate the poets because they help reveal the horizon of common opinion in the community—as television programs do today. I do not see how anyone could claim to understand contemporary America without understanding something of contemporary American television. Television is not the only component forming the horizon of American

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common opinion, but, as many commentators have noted, it surely has become the most important. The American people have increasingly come to understand their world in terms of what they see of it on television, which often provides them with both their raw data and the categories with which they analyze it. Television is constantly creating the myths of contemporary America, stories that exemplify our common experience and that therefore might help us reflect upon those myths.

From what I have said thus far, I may seem to be endorsing the movement in my profession known as cultural studies. Though I admire some of the work in this field, I have a basic quarrel with the movement as a whole, which approaches popular culture from a largely Marxist perspective. It tends to treat what appears on television as an example of “false consciousness,” an ideological smokescreen designed to hide from people the forces that are oppressing them, thus making them content with a social system against which they should in fact be rebelling. In the view of most practitioners of cultural studies, television simply serves the interests of capitalism, promoting the consumption of commodities and providing ideological justification for the market economy that produces them. The cultural studies movement generally does not turn to popular culture to learn something from it, but rather to teach it a lesson. Unlike Socrates, proponents of cultural studies do not take popular culture as their starting point for reflection; rather, they believe that they come to popular culture already possessing all the knowledge they

need—the theoretical machinery of Marxism, which allows them to expose the false consciousness embodied in television. As his attraction to the Athenian agora shows, Socrates did not share cultural studies' outright hostility to the "marketplace."

I am offering a Socratic approach to popular culture as an alternative to cultural studies as it is usually practiced today. There is nothing essential in the analyses of cultural studies that cannot be found (more elegantly developed and expressed) in Socrates' confrontation with the poets in Plato's dialogues. Plato is acutely aware of how poets often serve the dominant interests of their age—for example, by flattering the rulers in monarchies or aristocracies and the people in democracies. As we have seen, Plato's principal critique of the poets is that they reinforce the reigning ideas of their day, and hence the existing power structure. In the figure of Socrates, Plato was already offering what is known today as "ideology critique" or "culture critique." But Plato offers something more—and above all the possibility that some poets might point beyond the limited horizons of their age. Cultural studies generally takes a historicist approach to artistic activity and philosophic thought. In its view, all art and thought are historically determined; no artist or thinker is free of the biases and limited premises of the historical period in which he or she lives. Plato's parable of the cave in the *Republic* is, of course, the most vivid image ever invented of this kind of imprisonment within a limited worldview. But Plato's image allows for the possibility of a sun outside the cave and for the perennial human ability to ascend from the cave to view it. That is the fundamental meaning of Socratic philosophy as Plato presents it. Beginning with the images human beings create for themselves in the cave of their civic existence, philosophers such as Socrates begin an ascent from conventional opinion to true knowledge. Hence, the importance for Socrates of poetry and, more broadly, of popular culture as we understand it. Poets give us our best representations of the mental horizon of the human community, and some of them may well lead us beyond it.

By contrast, in Platonic terms, cultural studies' adherents view popular culture as consisting of all opinion and no knowledge, and, what is worse, as lacking the possibility of ascending from opinion to knowledge. For these critics, the only true knowledge comes entirely from outside the civic community, from cultural studies itself and the truth of its Marxist theory, which from its Olympian theoretical height passes judgment on the false consciousness of the common people down in the cave. Plato's Socrates actually has more respect for the popular culture of his day. For all his sense of its limitations, he chooses it as the starting point of his philosophy. He recognizes that a kind of partial knowledge may be embodied in the admittedly biased opinions of the civic community. Artisans, for example, though they lack clear knowledge of the cosmic whole, may have genuine knowledge of certain of its parts. As a philosopher, Socrates regards all opinion, no matter how conventional and confused, as potentially partial knowledge. Instead of trying to understand popular culture from an external theoretical standpoint, as cultural studies scholars do, he immerses him-

self in it, begins by accepting it on its own terms, and then tries to work his way up to true knowledge from within conventional opinion. He uses his conversations with such representatives of popular opinion as the poets to uncover the contradictions in their thinking and move beyond them.

That is the difference between Marxist and Socratic dialectic. In Marxism, dialectic is a historical process, moving through contradictions in material conditions from one self-contained culture to another (say, from feudalism to capitalism). Hence, for Marxists, at any given stage everyone is imprisoned within a certain cultural horizon (in a capitalist culture, for example, all art embodies capitalist ideology). In Plato, dialectic is a philosophical process, moving within any given cultural horizon from opinion to knowledge by means of uncovering intellectual contradictions. Plato always allows for the possibility of mental lib-



Nam June Paik's TV Rodin (1975)

eration, even while acknowledging how powerfully imprisoning the dominant ideas of any community tend to be.

I would be the first to admit that when a popular culture consists in part of Homer, the Greek tragedians, and Aristophanes, its usefulness for a philosophic ascent is greatly enhanced. All popular cultures are not created equal, as my epigraph from Keanu Reeves so eloquently attests. Nevertheless, the point of Socrates' famous turn from the heavens to the earth, his embrace of human speeches as the medium of philosophy, is that we must always begin not from an abstract theoretical standpoint but from what is first for us as members of a human community—and that, in effect, means popular culture. If the likes of *Gilligan's Island* and *The X-Files* are what currently appear on the wall of the cave, the way out and up may be longer and more circuitous than in Socrates' day, but his example tells us that these works are nonetheless where we must begin. I am not claiming that if Socrates were alive today, he would be writing a weekly column for *TV Guide*. But I do believe that he would be interrogating filmmakers and TV scriptwriters in the marketplace of Hollywood, just as he once did the poets and other artisans in the marketplace of Athens. Socrates never knew where philosophy might take him, but he always knew where to begin. □

The Perverse in the Popular

by *Martha Bayles*

At its best, American popular culture possesses a vitality that belies the facile criticisms of both Right and Left. At its worst—as in Jerry Springer’s daytime talk show, in which private misery and family dysfunction become public spectacle, a cockfight with psyches instead of roosters—popular culture seems to pose incalculable risks to what used to be called public morality.

In discussing both the vitality and the danger, we keep returning to the same dispiriting clichés. There’s more sex and violence than ever, yet sex and violence sell. Young people are being exposed to material that would have shocked their grandparents, yet there seems no way to protect them from it. We call for positive programs, yet our mass obsessions—murder trials, political scandals—focus almost entirely on the negative. Not surprisingly, we throw up our hands.

At this juncture, it is natural to turn to the scholars in the social sciences and the humanities who study popular culture and the electronic media. Popular culture includes novels, magazines, and other printed matter, but in most discussions the term chiefly refers to the realm of electronic media: radio, records, film, television, video games, and now the ubiquitous Internet. Many of our received ideas about popular culture so defined come from three sources of academic expertise: Communications theory focuses on the psychological impacts of media. Cultural studies is concerned with the role of popular culture in reinforcing and expanding the existing social order. Traditional philosophy emphasizes the perennial difficulty of sustaining excellence, or even decency, in a culture seemingly devoted to the lowest common denominator.

Each of these perspectives contains more than a grain of truth. But none addresses the most serious problem facing popular culture: the democratization, now on a global scale, of what I call “perverse modernism.” To the familiar vices of popular culture—notably, vulgarity and kitsch—perverse modernism has added a new twist: a radically adversarial stance toward society, morality, and art itself. That stance has gone from being the property of a tiny avant-garde a century ago to being part of the cultural mainstream today.

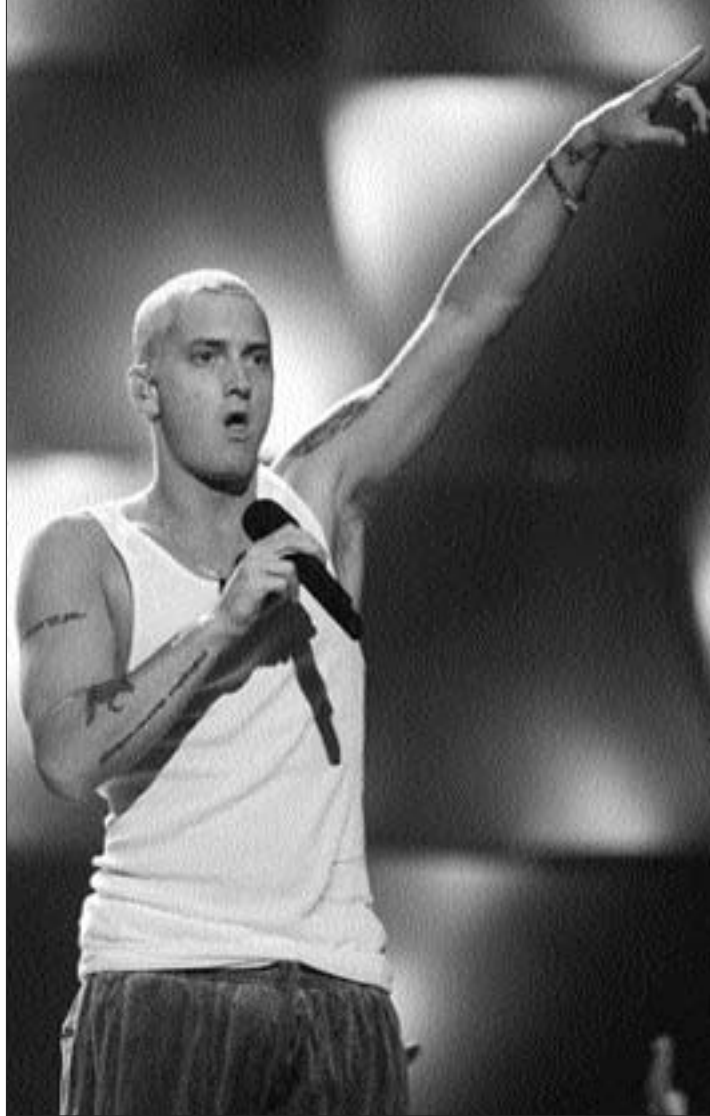
Perverse modernism is not the whole of modernism, by any means. But it is the easy part. Millions of people who cannot grasp the formal innovations of cubism have no trouble comprehending the publicity stunts of the dadaists. To the extent that today’s popular culture uses shock and scandal as a way of attracting attention and boosting sales, it is the child of perverse modernism. The “cutting edge” keeps shifting, of course. To perform in a bra was considered shocking when Madon-

na did it in the early 1980s; by the late 1990s, it was part of the Mexican-American singer Selena's "mainstream" image. Even many creators of popular culture who are not on the cutting edge assume that "pushing the envelope" of sex and violence is the very definition of "creativity."

Communications theory begins with what the media scholar W. Russell Neuman calls "the perception of a helpless mass public." Many of our received ideas about media come from Marshall McLuhan's bold hypothesis that "the medium is the message"—that the electronic media in this instance, like the print media before them, have the power to retool the human sensorium and, by extension, transform human consciousness.

McLuhan was by turns optimistic and pessimistic about this transformation, so it should come as no surprise that communications theory today has its optimists and its pessimists. In this era of the Internet, the optimists dominate. They predict a bright future in which every human being on the planet will be "empowered" by instant access to every other human being and to the species' shared information cornucopia. The pessimists, whose heyday coincided with the rise of television, foresee a gloomier future, in which the endless distractions of the screen will bring the death of literacy, reason, and civilization as we know it.

Both optimistic and pessimistic communications theorists embrace McLuhan's somewhat paradoxical assertion that the human mind is weaker than the media it creates for itself. How well grounded is this assertion? Neuman ventured an answer in *The Future of the Mass Audience* (1992), the product of a five-year study conducted for several major media companies. Noting that McLuhan raised important questions, but that it was "not his style" to research the answers, Neuman surveyed the available evidence and found what advertisers and educators already knew—that most human beings are "obdurate, impenetrable, resourcefully resistant" toward any message, regardless of medium, that does not fit "the cognitive makeup of the minds receiving it."



Rapper Eminem, the latest star to climb the stairway of shock, has made his mark with misogynistic and homophobic lyrics.

Anticipating the vast potential of the Internet, Neuman suggested that the same pattern of obduracy would be repeated. To judge by the evidence (including a decade of dot-com overreaching), the Internet has not caused a radical change in the way people relate to media. Despite the ubiquitous image of the perpetually cybersurfing teenager, the vast majority of us mortals do not seek complex interactivity or deep information retrieval. Wrote Neuman: “The mass citizenry, for most issues, simply will not take the time to learn more or understand more deeply, no matter how inexpensive or convenient such further learning may be.” People want from the Internet what they have always wanted from media: easy access to material of general interest and, especially, entertainment. The pattern may change with the next generation. But then again, it may not.

Is that regrettable? Only if you were hoping that the new media would transform human nature for the better. If you were expecting the opposite, it should be reassuring to think that is likewise beyond them.

While communications theory zeroes in on individual psychology, cultural studies focuses on the political and social impacts of media, and it too has its pessimists and its optimists. The pessimists take their cue from the Frankfurt School—that band of influential German-Jewish émigré intellectuals, spooked by the Nazis’ skillful use of radio and film, who argued during the 1930s and 1940s that American “mass culture” was itself a new totalitarianism, all the more powerful for being so subtle. In the minds of Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and other Frankfurt School thinkers, American popular culture could not possibly produce true works of art, because all of its products were by definition commodities manufactured by the advanced capitalist “consciousness industry.”

The optimistic branch of cultural studies emerged in the 1960s, when the leading lights of the German New Left, Jürgen Habermas and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, seized upon the ideas of another Frankfurt School theorist, Walter Benjamin. In a famous 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin had argued that the electronic media, especially film, could in the right hands (not Hollywood’s) be used to mobilize the masses in favor of socialist revolution. This idea inspired a new generation of cultural theorists who had grown up with television and movies, not to mention rock ‘n’ roll, to begin a passionate debate about whether particular works of popular culture were liberating or repressive, marginal or hegemonic, oppositional or dominant, and so on *ad dialecticam*.

Although its sex appeal has since faded somewhat, the optimistic branch of cultural studies now rules within the academy’s humanistic disciplines. Its academic practitioners place all “cultural products”—including objets d’art as traditionally defined, along with the artifacts of popular culture—on the same level, as specimens to be analyzed, not evaluated. Indeed, the concept of evaluation is itself regarded (theoretically, at least) as another datum to be analyzed.

This approach is not altogether bad. We live in an incredibly complex and dynamic cultural economy that delivers all kinds of objects, images, texts, and per-

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formances to all kinds of people, who respond to them in all kinds of ways. The intricate workings of this economy are fascinating, and as far as I can tell, cultural studies is the only field that makes a serious effort to map them.

But as anyone knows who has read an academic paean to the “transgressive” antics of Madonna, cultural theorists do not refrain from making judgments of value. What they do refrain from is basing those judgments on the standards of excellence worked out by artists (and critics) within a certain tradition. Instead, they apply their own standards, which begin with the assumption that all cultural products are ultimately about power and possess value only to the degree that they attack the established social order. The result, when translated into public discourse about the arts, is the now familiar culture war between moralists who insist that kitschy television series such as *Touched by an Angel* are genuine art because they preach family values, and academic apologists who celebrate decadent horror films such as *Hannibal* because their graphic depictions of gross criminality promise to *épater le bourgeois*.

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It would be nice to think that traditional philosophy provides the key to understanding what’s wrong with popular culture. But here again, there is a pronounced academic tendency to miss the point. Because most traditionalists in the humanities dismiss popular culture as the unappetizing fruit of democracy and commerce, they sidestep the urgent question of what makes it good or bad.

What would constitute a democratic model of excellence? I can sketch only a faint outline here. But one aspect would be the lack of a single center, of a geographic and aesthetically authoritative capital. In all high civilizations, the existence of a center has been a deeply rooted expectation. Even the rebellious romanticists and modernists who dissented from the Académie Française quickly recreated it in their own image. It was a short step for the impressionists from the Salon des Refusés to the walls of the Louvre. The alternative, it has always seemed, is relativism and a long, messy slide into decadence and chaos.

Such worries apply with special force to popular culture, which is generally understood to have no center, no tradition, and certainly no understanding of excellence apart from profitability. But is that understanding accurate?

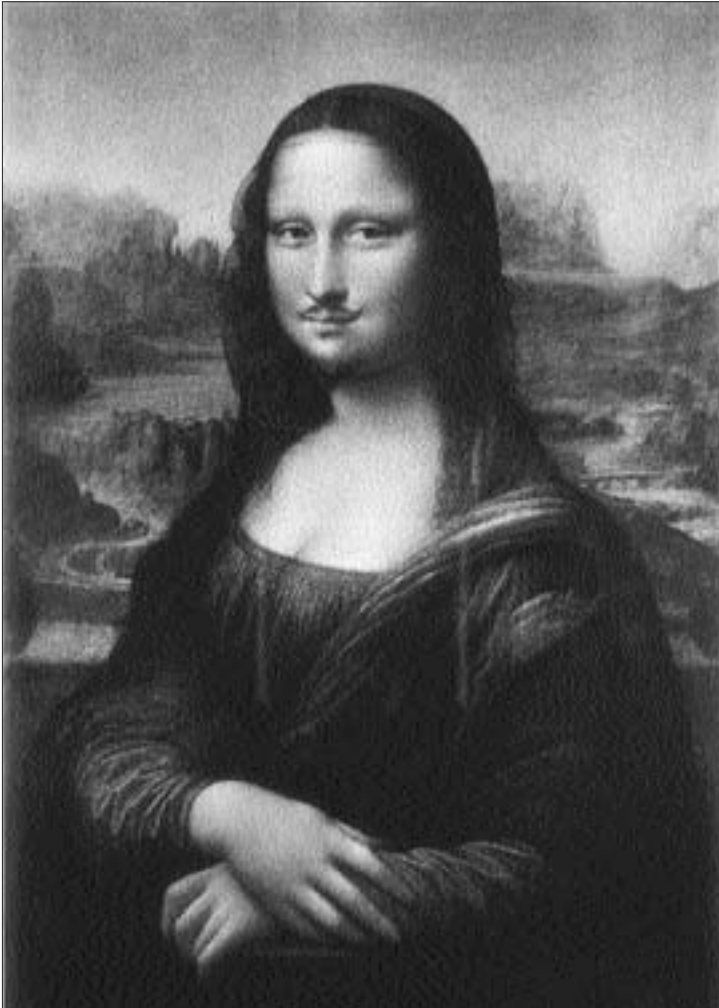
It has long been evident that, for good or ill, American elite culture lacks a capital. No matter how hard the practitioners of cultural studies try (and some of them try pretty hard), they have not proved convincingly that standards of artistic excellence in the United States emanate from a single (and, by definition, repressive) social-economic-political center. There is, of course, the National Endowment for the Arts. There is, of course, New York City. But there are also Chicago,

Popular Culture

Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and a hundred other places where good work is being done, and any one of them may well generate the next big trend.

It's not just the geography of cultural production that is decentralized and in flux. What else could one expect in a society committed to the moral and political equality of its citizens and to a marketplace model of culture? The question is whether such a society necessarily drives out excellence. The novelist Ralph Ellison noted that "in this country, things are always all shook up, so that people are constantly moving around and rubbing off on one another culturally." He admitted that this can be confusing, even disquieting. "There are no easily recognizable points of rest, no facile certainties as to who, what, or where (culturally or historically) we are," he wrote, adding that "the American condition is a state of unease."

Yet, as Ellison went on to argue, American diversity and unease are more often than not the parents of American excellence. Jacques Barzun, no admirer of popular culture, lends weight to the case when he reminds us that "the arts" are at best fragmentary and plural—not monolithic, as implied by that grand but misleading abstraction "Art."



Marcel Duchamp's L.H.O.O.Q. (1919) was shocking in its day but now, with the triumph of Duchamp's perverse modernism, seems almost innocent.

It is not relativism but realism to make the same observations about popular culture. The entertainment industries are full of cultivated, intelligent people who think about their work in a much more traditional way than academics do. Recording artists ponder melody and rhythm; film and television scriptwriters wrestle with plot and dialogue; production designers worry about color, texture, and line; actors and directors compare themselves with admired predecessors in film and theater. The language these people speak is a craft language, directly descended from that of the older performing arts. In other words, each craft has its own center of excellence.

These people understand the depredations of commerce. But they also strive for that rare prize, the chart or ratings or box-office success that is also a work of art. Such miracles don't happen every day, or even every year. But they do happen. And what's more, they last. In this time of dispute over the elite cultural canon, there is surprising agreement about what belongs in the canon of popular culture. The songs of Cole Porter, the compositions of Duke Ellington, the films of John Ford, the comic strips of Walt Kelly, the novels of Dashiell Hammett, and the 39 episodes of *The Honeymooners* that ran on CBS from 1955 to 1956 are just some of the works now described, without irony, as classic.

Given this sanguine picture of popular culture, why not stop worrying and learn to love it? What, after all, is the problem? The problem is perverse modernism. Not postmodernism (as some call it), because every item on the cultural agenda that currently bedevils us—rejecting tradition, attacking standards, provoking the audience, blurring the line between high and low and between art and life, and (last but not least) commandeering the mass media for subversive purposes—has been present since the dawn of modernism. This is the *révolté* impulse in modernism, rooted in the belief that if an artist makes the right anarchic gesture in the right place at the right time, he or she will help to spark social and political revolution. In this spirit, the German expressionist playwright Frank Wedekind staged scatological one-man shows in Munich's Café Simpli-cissimus at the end of the 19th century, the Italian futurists called for the razing of Venice in the years before World War I, and the dadaists later turned cabaret into the precursor of what we call performance art.

Severed from any viable expectation of revolution, the bold, outrageous gesture remains the true and only form of “creativity” for many people who have the wherewithal to know better (critics and pundits), and many more who do not (teenagers). In its present form as the guiding impulse of cutting-edge popular culture, perverse modernism goes beyond the usual run of sex and violence into a deliberate, intellectualized attempt to make sex and violence as offensive as possible. That means treating such primal experiences (the stuff of all great art, after all) in ways that are unfeeling, indifferent, detached from the consequences of actions, and contemptuous of moral concerns.

Perverse modernism would be a nonstarter today without obscenity. Gone are the days when audiences could be provoked by free verse, loose brush strokes, pounding rhythms, or vivid descriptions of lovemaking. In America, most people accept the right of the artist to do whatever he or she wants, because they know all too well that even if some fussbudget tries to drag an artist into court, the law contains a loop-

hole big enough to drive a Hummer through. If 2 Live Crew's *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, Robert Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*, and other controversial landmarks of the past 20 years can all be said to have "serious artistic value" in the eyes of the law, then blood-soaked video games and pornographic Web sites are home free.

That Americans are still (mildly) shocked by obscenity does not mean that the culture is still puritanical. In puritanical cultures, the slightest reference to the body causes undue shame. Shedding puritanism does not require that we extirpate *all* shame, or that we abandon the concept of obscenity.

By obscenity I do not mean hard-core pornography but something broader, a concept that encompasses violence as well as sex, and that does not exempt material judged to be of "serious artistic value." I take this definition from the political theorist Harry M. Clor, who makes it the basis of a principled argument for more censorship. But that is not my purpose. My purpose is to expose perverse modernism for the cheap gimmick it has become.

In Clor's view, obscenity does not reside in the representation of any particular bodily functions or conditions, but in the angle of vision taken toward them: Obscenity "consists in a degradation of the human dimensions of life to a sub-human or merely physical level. . . . Thus, there can be an obscene view of sex; there can also be obscene views of death, of birth, of illness, and of acts such as . . . eating or defecating. Obscenity makes a public exhibition of these phenomena and does so in a way such that their larger human context is lost or depreciated."

D. H. Lawrence made the point very lucidly when he said that repression and obscenity are two sides of the same coin. Repression, he argued, led to "sex in the head," or the inability to move beyond fantasy. Hence the infantile preoccupation with pornography that is, in Lawrence's famous judgment, "an attempt to insult sex, to do dirt on it."

When challenged for trading in obscenity, today's perverse modernists wrap themselves in the mantle of the great modernists—Flaubert, Stravinsky, Monet—who suffered opprobrium and even censorship because of their formal innovations or sexual candor. But that is nonsense. The great modernists were original without being obscene; today's charlatans are obscene without being original.

Our situation is unprecedented because never before in the history of culture has so perverse a view of art been so widely popular. One could argue that this is good news, because as perverse modernism flows into the mainstream, it faces something it has never had to face before: a plebiscite. Although I would not place undue faith in the artistic judgment of the millions of consumers who will cast the deciding votes, my Ellisonian side says better they than the "arts community," with its mindless reverence for offense. In the past, at least, the philistine public has weighed the claims of art against those of civility, decency, and morality.

Yet a plebiscite could also be bad news, because as the grim history of the last century shows, the worst kind of culture war is between artists who hate morality and moralists who hate art. Push the envelope hard enough, and you invite popular revulsion, which can lead all too swiftly to backlash, censorship, and worse. To judge by the atmosphere at many college campuses in recent years, the human urge to censor is alive and kicking.

Equally distressing is the widespread failure of cultural stewardship among prominent citizens who seem to find it more advantageous to fan the flames than to dampen them. Two years ago, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani touched off a media firestorm by attacking the *Sensation* exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, with its now infamous painting of an African Madonna replete with elephant dung. But if Giuliani was really concerned about the religious sensibilities of New York's Catholics, why didn't he act 10 months earlier, when his administration signed off on the proposal to mount the exhibit?

I'm not suggesting that Mayor Giuliani conspired with the sponsors and organizers of *Sensation*. But surely these sophisticated individuals understood that they were investing in a publicity windfall. The pattern is all too familiar: Third-rate art is shot into orbit by a first-class media blitz. In exhibitions such as this, you can forget the mediocre objects on display. The point of the exercise, the real masterpiece, is the PR.

To repeat, it was one thing when the outrageous gestures of avant-garde artists shocked a small number of *haute bourgeoisie* café and gallery goers. It is quite another when the same mentality dominates the makers of popular culture. Last May, Robert Wright, the president of NBC, wrote a letter to his industry colleagues complaining about the unfair advantage HBO's hugely successful series *The Sopranos* enjoys in the race for audiences and awards. What did Wright point to as the reason for the series' success? Not to its extraordinarily high level of writing and acting but to the regulatory environment that allows cable shows to show more (you guessed it) sex and violence.

Is *The Sopranos* a huge hit because it offers bigger doses of sex, violence, and profanity than network shows? Think about that for a minute. If the formula were really so simple, wouldn't every trashy program be a hit? This is the intellectual fallout from perverse modernism: a preoccupation with "pushing the envelope" that excludes from consideration any other definition of what makes a program good and successful in the marketplace. Yet last year, when *The Sopranos* triumphed in the ratings and swept the Emmys, the producers of the show had consciously reduced its quotient of sex and violence.

The real danger is this: As the game of artist versus moralist intensifies, it will drive everyone else off the stage. Jesse Helms against Robert Mapplethorpe, the Reverend Donald Wildmon against Marilyn Manson, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation against Eminem. Who benefits? The answer is obvious: the players. Politicians and preachers get to posture on C-SPAN; fat-cat art dealers and auction houses get fatter; Hollywood titans get to quote from the ACLU edition of the First Amendment; Johnny-come-lately dadaists, neglected outer-borough museums, and obscure record labels hit the big time; and a legion of lawyers get to sling the kind of dung that does not come from elephants.

And who suffers? Again, the answer is obvious: in the elite arts, the many poets, painters, and performers who strive to move audiences, not disgust them; in popular culture, the countless hard-working craftspeople (and the handful of genuine artists) who go to work every day hoping to create not just another product but something of lasting value. And, of course, the rest of us suffer too—the vast, unwashed, imponderable democratic audience, whose good judgment may or may not lead us out of this predicament. □