

12 *I, Catherine*, p. 55.

13 *I, Catherine*, pp.71–75. See also H. Prejean, 'Two thousand volts and apple pie', *The Tablet*, 15/22 April, 1995, pp.495–496, written by a member of a religious order, who acts as a 'spiritual advisor' to men facing execution whom she too accompanies to their deaths, having also learned to listen to the 'unspeakable stories of loss and grief and rage and guilt' experienced by the families of the victims. She argues very clearly that even those who have committed the most terrible crime of killing are more than their worst crime, and opposes capital punishment. Catherine of Siena did not of course attempt to challenge the laws which sent the convicted to their deaths, but her Christ-like compassion seems still to be of profound importance in analogous circumstances.

American Art Cultural Crisis

John Navone SJ

I American Art Reflects Crisis

Art inevitably reflects the virtues and vices of the culture that produces it. This article treats of the American cultural crisis as reflected in American art and then discusses the moral and religious implications of this crisis.

1 *Shock art*

Martha Bayles, in her *Atlantic Monthly* article 'The Shock Art Fallacy' (Feb., 1994, p. 20), affirms that "Obscenity as art is everywhere. ... Never before in the history of culture has obscenity been so pervasive." She calls attention to a *Spin* magazine jeans advertisement in which a young man brandishes a handgun over the caption "Teaching kids to KILL helps them to deal directly with reality." In the Whitney Museum Bayles finds a photographic display of penises in one room and a row of video monitors showing "transgressive" sexual practices in another. The compulsion to shock dominates popular music, movies, television, publishing, talk-shows, stand-up comedy, and video games. Whatever the cultural bomb-throwers seem to think, Bayles avers that this does

170

not mean we cannot be shocked. Obscenity, she affirms, is shocking. The Supreme Court defined obscenity as the depiction of “sexual conduct” in a “patently offensive way” lacking “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” This definition, because it focuses exclusively on sex while exempting material possessing “serious artistic value,” is irrelevant to our present situation. A better definition for Bayles, comes from the legal scholar Harry M. Clor who argues that obscenity resides not in 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 that of eating or defecating. Obscenity makes a public exhibition of these phenomena and does so in such a way that their larger human context is lost or depreciated.

Bayles argues that obscenity is shocking because it violates our sense of shame — the natural, universal response to nakedness, eroticism, and suffering. In most human societies these states are taboo — meaning not forbidden but sacred and awe-inspiring, connected with the mysterious beginnings and endings of life. It is only in the modern West that Bayles finds people have sought to eradicate these taboos. Or to exploit them. Today’s shock artists, Bayles concludes, equate shame with repression because they are committed to obscenity as the only reliable means of getting a shocked reaction out of the public. They flatter themselves that this reaction is akin to that in the great scandals of the modernist past when, instead, it reflects the simple fact that most people are not exhibitionists or voyeurs. Most people, Bayles believes, feel slight embarrassment and a strong need for either ritual or privacy when eating, eliminating, making love, suffering, and dying. If that makes them unable to appreciate “art,” then the word has lost its meaning.

Although Bayles may hesitate to put too much faith in the aesthetic judgment of everyday people, she is convinced that they are more reliable than the shock artists, with their fond belief that if something is shockingly degrading and dehumanizing, it is, perforce, art. The mainstream is likely to weigh the claims of art against those of civility, decency, and morality.

Raising the specter of the Nazi crackdown on “degenerate art,” shock artists warn that the same thing is happening today, because the National Endowment for the Arts is under fire from conservatives. Yet

all this stale posturing proves, for Bayles, is that some artists are so isolated from the rest of the world that they cannot face a reality check. In one breath they vow to disrupt the (presumably) repressive social order. In the next they complain that the power behind that order — the government — will not pay their bills.

2 *Pop art*

Bryan Appleyard writes (*The Independent*, Nov, 17, 1993) that if popular culture is used as a weapon against high cultural standards, the result is a freak show. Appleyard decries the mistaken assumption that mass culture undermines previous conceptions of excellence. This assumption appealed to young people who had been told that rebellion was the natural condition of their existence and whose most acute artistic experiences were most likely to have been derived from Bob Dylan than from Brahms. The gist of this assumption was that the traditional cultural canon was an arbitrary, value-laden imposition; the reality of the modern world was a shifting mass of cultural systems in which a can of beans could be seen as replete with meaning as a Rubens. Appleyard holds that the opposite of this assumption is true. The reason any of us are able to detect any new artistic excellence at all is because the culture has made us critically aware. Because pop art is easily glorified and commercially attractive, its elevation to art — according to Appleyard — will tend to be a conquest rather than an acceptance:

Free the schools and colleges to teach what pop they like and Flaubert will be driven out. Chaos will ensue — indeed, has ensued in the United State.... Turn education into a dim-witted wallow in the dislocated mire of cultural studies and the future will produce ... deracinated weirdos such as Michael Jackson, the pathetic figure of the week, lurching from burnt scalp to exotic skin and dental problems and now, apparently, painkiller addiction, without the faintest conception of who or what he is, and whose personal rock of stability appears to be Elizabeth Taylor. You can discuss this creature at length as a glittering pop emblem of the culture as a whole. But really he is no more than a wrecked victim of that culture, of pathological, but not aesthetic, interest.... Turning popular culture into a cause, a guerrilla war against the old high cultural standards, courts this kind of freak show by encouraging the belief that going with the global electronic flow is somehow virtuous. In reality it is no more than a passive acceptance of what Raymond Williams called “technological determinism”. Technology is beginning to create a worldwide 24-hour entertainment system that will embody and sell purely pop values.

3 *Politically Correct art*

Ken Ringle ("When Artists Acquiesce to Their Own Corruption," *International Herald Tribune*, 1994) writes that the arts world of the '90s is one where aesthetics and creativity too often take second place to political posturing, and the only people we are not afraid of offending are heterosexual white males. It is true, Ringle admits, that for too long the arts community ignored or stereotyped ethnic or cultural minorities. But today the forces of PC (political correctness) try to remedy that not by avoiding stereotypes altogether — Southern sheriffs, fundamentalist ministers and Catholic nuns, for example, are acceptable targets for one-dimensional ridicule — but by treating the arts like a Marin County (California) group therapy session, where all problems will be solved if we just shout at the "oppressive establishment" and give everyone else a hug.

Any artist's view, Ringle grants, is selective, and times and tastes change. But he believes that what distinguishes the particular force presently tainting the arts from those before is its intellectual cowardice. The arts community has rarely been so earnestly acquiescent in its own censorship and corruption. What he finds so maddening about the PC groupthink is its implication that there is some sort of conflict between nurturing genuine cultural diversity and maintaining the classic aesthetic criteria that have produced and recognized great art through the ages. No such conflict, Ringle affirms, exists.

If films in the past, for example, misrepresented Indians and blacks, it was because blinded by naivete or prejudice, filmmakers resisted treating them as individuals. Political correctness, in its insistence on defining and promoting art according to race or gender or ethnicity or circumstances of the artists or performer, extends the same dehumanising mentality in a different context.

Does the great and significant art of every culture meet some test beyond the age, sex, race, ethnicity or politics of its creator? Does it transcend the barriers of time and language to speak to some universal concept of truth and beauty mysteriously linking all humankind? The obvious answer for Ringle is yes: "great art springs not from hatred, fear and groupthink but from wonder, hope and the compelling vision of an individual artist". The Renaissance was about discovery, and so is all great art. Anger and fear are, for Ringle, what political correctness is all about: anger at all the inequities of life and society, fear of images and language and difference — and of one's own artistic inadequacy as well. Anger and fear only rarely produce great art. What they do produce — and Ringle finds the 16th century highly instructive — is the destruction of great art, from the Spanish sacking of Aztec temples to the English looting of New Spain.

4 *Art and Nihilism*

David Rieff, writing of “Nihilism and the Genius of American Pop Culture” (*International Herald Tribune*, Jan. 6, 1994), affirms that “American consumer culture is corrosive of all traditions and established truths.” He triumphantly affirms that American mass culture has become the global benchmark because “It is the history-less, willed quality of American popular culture, its conviction that dreams and realities are, or at least should be, indistinguishable, that makes it superior to anything that can be produced by societies where people lived longer and believed their cultures to be less perennially up for grabs.” The organic specificity of French or Japanese or Egyptian history makes it so difficult — Rieff believes — for such cultures to concoct the dreamscape that has been America’s great contribution to the 20th century. Rieff holds that “A country motivated by assumptions on the part of its ruling class that history is bunk” or that “the only business of America is business” is unlikely to worry very much about questions of quality so long as the customers keep buying.”

With high culture in retreat, Rieff asserts that the field is clear for mass culture. He finds that this is the real significance of America’s academic culture wars. While radicals and neoconservatives squabble, the selling goes on:

The genius of American popular culture resides precisely in the nihilism of its entrepreneurs and, finally, in the society whence they spring. There is a staunch refusal to admit that anything needs to be taken so seriously as to get in the way of its marketing, and a confidence that anything can be marketed if it is given the right advertising spin.

The commercial success of American cultural nihilism is epitomized by Oliver Stone’s “Natural Born Killers,” the most popular film for several weeks in the United States. The film glamorizes two lovers depicted as resplendent free spirits who commit dozens of graphic murders, shooting total strangers in the face or cutting their throats as they plead for their lives. As they kill they tell jokes or kiss while a music soundtrack plays, sometimes joined by a laugh track. Nearly a hundred killings are shown in extreme detail, a glorification of violence stunning even by the standards of Hollywood shamelessness. Yet this film is a product of a mainstream studio, Warner Brothers, owned by Time Warner, a major public company. For good measure, throughout the movie flash subliminal-speed images of screaming people covered with blood, decapitated bodies, children watching parents murdered, men strangling beautiful, struggling women in

revealing lingerie. Time Warner's television advertising announces this movie as "delirious, daredevil fun!"

A contributing editor for *Newsweek* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, Gregg Easterbrooks, reviewing this film ("Reels of Graphic Overkill, Peddled as Daredevil Fun," *International Herald Tribune* Sept. 23, 1994), concludes:

It is a baleful indictment of contemporary intellectual affairs that this odious film and its popularity have not triggered protests, even from feminists. The director, Oliver Stone, seems shielded by his affectational leftism. Mr. Stone also sought to immunize the film by loading it with digs against the press. He knows media outlets presently bend over backwards not to be seen as criticizing those who criticize them. The thinking world has fallen for this ploy and is letting "Killers" off the hook.

The ultra-violence of "Killers," Easterbrook affirms, is passed off as mere artistic representation of true-life serious killing. Actually, he continues, nothing is realistic about the degree of slaughter depicted. The protagonists murder 52 people in three weeks; whereas mass-murderer John Wayne Gacy, for example, killed 33 people over a period of three and a half years!

"Killers", Easterbrook asserts, is an important financial innovation for Time Warner, allowing a major conglomerate to exploit the sordid appeal of the slasher flick while hiding behind a patina of social commentary. To create the latter effect, he notes that the film spends half an hour belaboring the faux-intellectual cliché that there is no difference between murderers and the law. Does this mean, he asks, if Oliver Stone were in danger he would not call a cop? Easterbrook agrees with the promoters' claim that "Killers" exposes a sickness in our society: "The sickness is in Mr. Stone and Warner Brothers' management, who seek profit by trendy mockery of human life." The prevalent nihilism of American pop culture is the context for the much-discussed book *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, in which Boston College education professor William Kilpatrick bluntly states that American schools have produced a generation of "moral illiterates." In a similar vein, the English historian, Paul Johnson, sees eerie parallels between what is happening with American youth and their counterparts in Central Europe where, increasingly, we are seeing the primitive and irrational behaviour of racism, ethnic triumphalism, xenophobia, and hatred of refugees. Such students, says Johnson, are "fitter candidates for a mob than for citizenry."

II Culture and Religious and Moral Values

1 *Need for Moral and Religious Foundations*

Norman Lear, the TV producer who founded People for the American Way, a man who long decried religious influence in American schools, now sounds the alarm over its virtual disappearance. In Lear's cogent explanation, the schools became so paranoid about appearing to affirm one religion or one value over another that they banished them all. William J. Moloney, superintendent of schools in Easton, Pennsylvania, writes ("Are students 'moral illiterates'?" in a Philadelphia newspaper) in response to Lear's observations:

The resulting moral vacuum is compounded by such faddish inanities as "values clarification," which interprets tolerance to mean all points of view are equally legitimate. By that calculus, both Hitler and Gandhi qualify as "philosopher-kings" — albeit with differing approaches to governance.

From time immemorial, according to Moloney, successful societies and their educational systems have depended on moral foundations of shared values and mutual obligations. If we lose this most basic of all basics, then whether Johnny can read or write may prove tragically irrelevant.

Cal Thomas, columnist with *The Los Angeles Times* Syndicate, writes (June 16, 1994) that "Most people are awakened to the fact that something has gone dreadfully wrong in America. We won the Cold War, but we have the lost culture war. More people fear guns in the schools and on the streets than they do someone who might say a prayer over the public school system." Cal Thomas notes that "The Pagan Left" smears conservative Christians by conjuring up images of snake handlers and the like because it knows it has lost on the issues. It raises the specter of imposed morality, but cannot defend its imposed immorality, which has produced, according to the Census Bureau the highest divorce rate in the world, the highest teen pregnancy rate, the most abortions, the highest percentage of children raised in single-parent homes, the highest percentage of violent deaths among the young and a male homicide rate that is five times greater than in any other developed country except Mexico.

Cal Thomas, in another syndicated column (July 7, 1994), writes that "In the past, conflicts with government about moral and religious issues were mostly won by the church. Today, the state is winning most of these battles because the church has lost its moral voice, too often preferring a political to a spiritual agenda, an earthly to a heavenly kingdom."

2 *An Appeal for Responsibility*

Senator Robert C. Byrd, Democrat of West Virginia, as guest columnist for *USA Today* (Sept. 25, 1990) appealed to the television industry to realize that broadcasting presumes a public trust and that the trash and junk and vileness regularly being spewed out in so much current programming is a violation of the terms of that trust. Four years later, his appeal is no less relevant. He denounced "the omnipresent profanity of speech, sensationalized violence and semipornographic visualization of so much that is broadcast over the airways for public consumption." By the current tolerance of this diminution of taste and values on television, we are teaching our children that the basest level of human behavior is the accepted norm. Byrd's concern was for the future tone of public civility and tastefulness in the United States: "The crudeness, cursing, profanity, vice and violence we tolerate today on our television screens will be the crudeness, cursing, profanity, vice and violence that we will be forced to endure in our real lives in the years ahead."

Rabbi and author Neil Kurshan observes that "When we begin to doubt the absolute goodness of God ... we are left with only ourselves as the final arbiters of morality. When values are no longer rooted in an absolute goodness, they become only as good as those who hold them" (Cited by Senator Coats, "America's Youth: A Crisis of Character," in *Imprimis* 20/9, Sept., 1991, Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan, p. 3). Senator Coats, in his Hillsdale College speech, remarked that in the visual arts, in literature, in film, in music, the ability to shock has replaced the ability to inspire. The politically correct notion of culture currently rejects objective standards by which persons are judged as fortunate or unfortunate, admirable or contemptible, reasonable or absurd, human or less than human. The tragic hero of classical literature and drama, pressed to decision by the pulls and counterpulls of good and evil, right and wrong, has no place in pop culture. In tragedy there is the tension between "I ought" and "I want," between obligations and passions, precisely because the tragic hero is mature enough to recognize the difference between right and wrong. The humanoids of pop culture lack the moral development for the tragic sense of possible human self-destruction.

America's crisis of values is not a marginal issue pursued by moralists. It is central to the health and success of individuals and the nation itself. America's democratic political order is not-self-sufficient; it cannot succeed without a morally responsible society. The once-prevailing view that American democracy depends on people recognizing God-given principles of justice and morals is now pitted against a view that the nation is not bound to any fixed truths or morality.

3 *Avery Dulles on the “culture war”.*

Jesuit theologian A. Dulles believes that the United States is caught in a “culture war” that threatens the nation’s political heritage (“Theologian Fears for the Future of Democracy” by George W. Cornell, in *The Washington Post*, Oct. 24, 1992.) Dulles believes that a past, pervasive recognition that healthy self-government relied on general acceptance of common moral standards is withering away:

“Ultimately, this could bring the collapse of democracy.” He believes that the trend is linked to the impact of technological progress, to the idea that whatever we can do we should do. People get the idea that morality is simply an attempt to put restraints on progress. They want as much as they can get as quickly as they can get it.

Dulles believes that the loss of moral consensus also results from the elimination of religion from state-controlled schools and other public institutions under the slogan of separation of church and state: “Anything funded by the government has to be stripped of religious conviction. You can believe in Marx or anything else, but you can’t mention God. In effect, we are establishing secularism. That is what makes it difficult to maintain any moral climate in the country as a whole ... Morality cannot be firmly established in the absence of religious faith ... The church should work at raising sights above the sordid quest for pleasure, wealth and power, restraining the drives of hedonism, ambition and pride that everywhere threaten civil peace and order.” Dulles concludes that the church makes its best contribution “by being itself” in nurturing personal faith and morality.

4 *George Weigel on the Most Basic Human Right*

George Weigel, at a hearing held by the ecumenical organization Christian Solidarity International parallel to the meetings of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver (1983), affirms that religious freedom, liberty of conscience, is the first and most basic of human rights. Religious liberty, he explained, means that there is a sphere of privacy at the core of every human person which can never become public property. Religious freedom is thus the most basic of human rights because it establishes the radical distinction between the individual and the state that is the basis of any meaningful scheme of human rights. Properly understood and exercised, the right of religious liberty is not a threat to any state which is legitimately serving the common good of its people. Secularist attempts to root out the religious dimension from public life threaten the foundations of an authentically democratic society.

Weigel maintains that, by its very nature — by its insistence that

rights inhere in persons, and are not luxuries or benefices distributed by public authority — the right of religious freedom stands as a living condemnation of every form of public authority that does not serve the common good, but only its own selfish ends. Intolerance of religion attacks what is most central to human beings: our orientation toward the transcendent God Who is the Whither and Whence of our lives, the Source from which we have come and the Home to which we are ever drawn. To deny religion a place in human affairs is to tear the very fabric of our personhood, undermining the ultimate foundations of morality and human decency.

5 Stephen Carter and “The Culture of Disbelief”

Is the American elite routinely disdainful or hostile to religion? Yes, affirms Yale University law professor Stephen Carter in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief*. Originally, Carter wanted to call the book “God as a Hobby.” That acid phrase which survives as a chapter heading, means that the intellectual class thinks religion is fine as a personal pursuit, like woodworking or chess. But if religions bring their moral concerns into the public arena, the elite is always ready to know about dangerous zealots and a crumbling wall between church and state.

It is a solid, well-argued book, but the truth is, the circumstances surrounding the book may outweigh the text itself. First, President Clinton read *The Culture of Disbelief* while on vacation and explicitly endorsed its theme, suggesting that American Liberalism is in danger of automatically distrusting people who take public positions based on religious convictions.

This means that the academics, journalists, activists and arts people who generally keep religion out of the national conversation, will probably have to chatter/complain a bit about this book.

Secondly, the author is an Episcopalian, a liberal, a black man and a Yale law professor, none of which fits the conventional profile of people who complain about elite efforts to marginalize religion.

In 1992, the American Catholic Bishops talked of the dominant secular culture’s strong tendency to privatize faith, to push it to the margins of society. How has the elite culture done this to religion? Simply by acting on unspoken shared assumptions that religion is backward, medieval, embarrassing or irrelevant. One problem is that the elite culture is so wedded to individualism, choice, secularity and freedom from restraint that it cannot accept the fact that religions are communities that operate in and out of the political arena on shared moral beliefs.

As Carter asserts, the churches are intermediate institutions

(situated between the individual and the state) to which citizens owe a separate allegiance. Religion is a form of organized resistance to the state and culture. Its social and political function is to resist conventional wisdom on grounds of clear principle. A religion is, for Carter, a way of denying the ultimate authority of the rest of the world.

In law, the courts have progressively chopped away at/diminished the functions of religions as communities. Mary Anne Glendon, professor of law at Harvard University, points out that the U.S. Supreme Court, largely indifferent to religion, has framed it in individualistic terms: Religion is an “inviolably private,” “individualistic experience” and a religion “worthy of the name” is a product of “choice.”

These are the mental categories of the secular elite, the footprints of what Glendon calls “the dogmas of knowledge-class culture.” That culture basically thinks it is illegitimate for religions to do what they are set up to do: act communally and forcefully on moral issues.

In the last two generations, the courts have seriously impinged on traditional concepts of the role of religion in America. The founding fathers thought that the First Amendment’s establishment clause meant that the state should be friendly to all religions, but play no favorites. Now it is taken to mean that the state is neutral between belief and non-belief: it vigorously promotes secularity in all public functions.

In law, the elite culture has vastly inflated the establishment clause (even moments of silence in public schools now seem to establish religions), while progressively constricting the free exercise of religion. Carter runs through a series of cases where the regulatory state tells believers what religious principles they can and cannot act upon. As Glendon writes, free exercise seems to have been left on the sidelines of the rights revolution.

This is why religious groups often seem to be defensive, and are increasingly depicted as out-of-step, backward-looking zealots. But when these groups are undercut, all of society pays a price. Me-first individualism and “choice” are no substitute for moral traditions.

Endnote

The *N York Times*, in a survey conducted in the summer of 1995, asked what Americans think of American popular culture. In the starkly negative answer the people blamed television as the principal force behind teenage violence and irresponsible sex and, more generally, for its degrading influence on American public standards. More than half of the adults polled could not think of a single positive thing to say about American television, movies or popular music, while nine out of ten had bad things to say about them. They not only objected to sex and

violence, but to vulgarity, bias and plain stupidity in the products of the popular cultural industry.

Over half believed that movies, television and pop music lyrics contributed “a lot” to teenage violence and sex. The same views were expressed about video games and pop music.

Against this popular condemnation of the popular cultural industry, William Pfaff (“Dismay in Desert of the Beaux Arts,” *International Herald Tribune*, Sept. 7, 1995) notes a curious alliance of wealth and ideology defends it. Those who profit from providing violent entertainment say it is what the marketplace demands, and they are supported by a civil liberties lobby that denies violence in entertainment has anything to do with how people behave. The latter does this, according to Pfaff, in the name of unlimited freedom of expression in every possible medium, deriving this position from its commitment to the defense of political expression.

The American Civil Liberties Union maintains that there is no evidence of a causal connection between television and violence, despite the fact that American business and politicians spend billions of dollars on television because they know that television does influence behavior.

Industry says that it gives the public what it wants. It is true that the profits lie in the appeal to what is most base in people. The steady slide of the mass media toward what is most vulgar and demagogic shows the public is implicated in what has happened. Nonetheless, as *The Times* poll demonstrates, the public is ashamed of itself. It is true that this is hypocrisy. But civilization, certainly the middle-class civilization of the liberal democracies, has always been sustained by the hypocrisy of defending public standards of conduct superior to those that many, or even most, observe in their private lives.

The existence of the standard, affirms Pfaff, invites public emulation, exercising an educational and normative influence. There is a public desire for high standards in political life. Postwar American presidents have offered either dynamism to reform society, or the maintenance of standards — implicitly, moral and social standards. Today, the appeal of Colin Powell as a possible independent presidential candidate is that he seems to represent a higher standard of public life.

Pfaff argues that when public opinion about the standards people want is confronted with a deliberate and cynical political demagoguery and with a continuing search by corporations for profit in degrading entertainment — and when these find support from both civil libertarians and believers in the unrestricted marketplace, there has to be a bad outcome. Pfaff concludes that the rage of citizens against the country’s establishment has already provoked violence from one alienated segment of the public, and there is a massive electoral nonparticipation. There is also, as the poll shows, much despair that government or industry will do anything to meet the public’s demands for higher standards. The country’s establishment would do well to heed these serious warnings.