

## Who Killed Culture

### From barbarism to democracy, elites seek a suspect in the reported death of art. Charles Paul Freund

Lower your voice and show some respect: America's cultural establishment has collapsed in mourning. Even in the best of times, the nation's elite culture regards its health as fragile and its future as doubtful. But now it sits in doleful misery, its tunic rent and ashes sprinkled liberally on its bowed head. What happened? Bad news indeed: The cultural establishment's last line of defense--the National Endowment for the Arts--has been routed. Now nothing stands between art and barbaric pillage.

Truth is, one piece of bad NEA news came after another last fall, rather like Job's servants arriving in relays to report his compounding ruin. First, the House of Representatives voted to kill the NEA entirely. The endowment survived thanks to the Senate, but its budget was again cut, this time to \$98 million, a reduction of \$78 million since 1992. Then, the Hill gave the NEA permission to pursue additional private funding--in effect, a license to privatize. To the high priests who tend culture's flame, this is tantamount to defilement, because private funds have private interests attached to them. Then, NEA head Jane Alexander announced that, after four years in the role, she'd had enough and was returning to acting. Alexander is probably the most effective lobbyist the NEA has ever had, and has been instrumental in keeping the endowment alive in the face of congressional hostility; her departure was perceived as a setback for federal patronage.

But the worst blow to American high culture was self-inflicted. In October, the NEA released a report on the state of the national arts, *American Canvas*, that was intended to celebrate Alexander's leadership. It is an incoherent document, on the one hand rejecting commercially generated culture while, on the other, accusing the high-end cultural establishment of failing to serve a popular audience. Worse, not only did *American Canvas* discern an undemocratic "elitism" among America's artists, it sought to subordinate cultural activity to modish social metaphysics, especially such values as diversity and multiculturalism. That report naturally offended those who have been contemptuous of federal cultural management all along.

But it also offended many of those who have looked to the endowment as a sanctuary for "serious" artistic expression, for "quality" freed from pandering commercialism. Now, from the NEA's own point of view, art has been joined to an ethnic census of those producing it. And because the NEA report sees art manifested in such entertainments as children's face painting, culture becomes divorced from either "seriousness" or "quality." A number of pro-NEA critics looked at the report, saw betrayal, and donned sackcloth. Having given over art to the state to protect it from the seductive wiles of profit, they were shocked to discover that art had commenced sleeping with politics instead. The Vestal being debauched, all that remained was to wall her up and to prepare for the coming onslaught of barbarism and bad taste.

Published reaction to this chain of events makes for useful, if often startling, reading. A series of essays, half-funereal and half-forensic, have appeared that are noteworthy for two elements: their often seething anger and their attempt to cast blame for this perceived cultural disaster. In their effort to determine just who is killing high culture, critics have rounded up some interesting suspects. Here's an abbreviated line-up:

*Barbarism*. This is playwright Tony Kushner's suspect, as identified by him in a perfectly furious essay published in the *Los Angeles Times*. To Kushner, NEA beneficiary and author of the immense commercial and critical success *Angels in America*, "our choice" as a society is "really the NEA or barbarism." The role of government, he writes, includes "guaranteeing a decent standard of life for all citizens, which standard must include both breathable air and accessible, serious art." That is why "the fight for the NEA is, at its core, the fight for America's political soul, our identity." Kushner believes that the NEA's response to its critics has been too soft, or, as he puts it, "blasé." The endowment shouldn't be prattling on about elitism and funding alternatives; it should be demanding ever more government money in the name of civilization. Instead, its report is an exercise in complacency, and "isn't complacency a declaration for barbarism?"

Kushner feels no need to define what he means by "barbarism." And in a way he doesn't have to, because the warning of the barbarians' approach is among the oldest complaints in cultural history. It dates back, most famously, to the Roman poet Juvenal, an embittered and perceptive curmudgeon who, in the first century A.D., introduced the phrase *bread and circuses* to the Western litany of alarm about the dangers of satisfying mass desires.

Cultural historian Patrick Brantlinger, who has traced the history of the idea of mass culture as social decay from antiquity to modern times, terms the concept "negative classicism." Give the masses what they want, goes this argument, and their low, bloodthirsty characters will overwhelm the better sort of people and eventually destroy civilization. The screaming vulgarities who packed Rome's arenas paved the way for the collapse of that mighty empire; their modern, mass-audience counterparts, gorged on cynically made-for-profit entertainments, are

undermining our own society.

(It's worth mentioning in passing that the lavish distribution of grain and the infamous "games" and "contests" of Rome were state programs intended to control the populace. The spectacles were hugely expensive, and helped ruin those who had to pay for them. Had Rome's culture actually operated on a for-profit basis, the bloody arenas might never have existed. In fact, Rome did develop a nascent market culture in its famous booksellers and mimes, though it failed to develop the idea of authors' rights that would have encouraged that market's development.)

Kushner's nearest formulation of negative classicism is in the form of a largely unintelligible question: "[A]re we going to continue on the path of surrendering more and more of our vital, social, communal strength, health and will to an ego-anarchism...serving the mad profiteering of a monied elite?" The problem with critiques of mass culture that demonize the producer is that, in seeking to exclude the mass audience from blame, they necessarily deprive it of will. The struggle for culture is therefore reduced to a pair of small, warring camps: mad profiteers vs. the enlightened, nonprofit NEA. More money equals salvation for the NEA, art, and civilization. How much money Kushner doesn't say, but the European example of state-supported culture may give us an indication.

The NEA has never spent more than about 64 cents per citizen to improve our cultural lives. France, on the other hand, spends \$32 per Frenchman for the same purpose. Yet France is filled with cultural elites who sound even more desperate than Kushner does. They complain bitterly not only of a rise in domestic barbarism but of American cultural terrorism and imperialism too. Anyway, given that elites have been raising the alarm about the barbarians for 20 centuries, it is unlikely that such brutes are the proximate cause of the NEA's woes. But there are other suspects.

*Democracy.* This is the culprit fingered by *New York Times* critic Edward Rothstein in an extraordinary manifesto-like essay. Rothstein, deeply offended by the NEA's accusation of arts elitism, fired back that the arts were *supposed* to be elitist. Art, he wrote, is "an essentially undemocratic achievement by extraordinarily gifted individuals." The "real problem" with the 30-year-long NEA debate, according to Rothstein, "might be called the 'ideology of democracy.'" In this vision of the world, not only are all people created equal but so are all ideas and all cultures," the antithesis of artistic discrimination. "There are differences between us at birth that the civil order must ignore but the esthetic order is beholden to," he argued. "Even the evaluation of art is guided by such undemocratic gauges as cultivated taste and extensive experience."

This is an elitism of such purity as to inspire awe. But in the course of making a number of reasonable points (about, for example, the necessity of distinctions), Rothstein makes a pair of serious errors. The first is that he imagines himself in a debate with democracy. He's not; he's in a debate with other elites who have gone slumming in multiculturalist dogma, and who have gained ascendancy in a number of cultural institutions. The second is that while he characterizes democracy as an ideology, he regards art as an unchanging state that can be appreciated best by those with sufficiently refined sensibilities (such as himself). But art is not a state of being; it too has a significant ideological dimension, and that is as true for the elitist concept Rothstein is championing as it is for any other.

In fact, the system of fine arts as we understand them arose only in the 18th century. Poetry and drama, of course, extend to antiquity. But the ancient world understood the arts in quite different terms. Rhetoric was an art. Medicine was an art. Magic was an art. Indeed, anything that had to be learned systematically and had an effect on others was regarded as an art. NOR DID THE MIDDLE AGES SHARE ANYTHING LIKE OUR NOTION OF THE FINE ARTS, ACCORDING TO ART HISTORIAN P.O. KRISTELLER. Thomas Aquinas, for example, identified the arts as including cooking, shoemaking, and juggling. Imitative arts such as painting and sculpture were never grouped together conceptually or understood as such. EVEN RENAISSANCE IDEAS OF ART DIFFER SIGNIFICANTLY FROM OUR OWN. LEONARDO DA VINCI REGARDED PAINTING AND MATHEMATICS (BUT NOT ARCHITECTURE) AS BEING OF A SINGLE CLASS OF ACTIVITIES, WHILE OTHERS COMPARED MUSIC TO FENCING AND EQUESTRIANISM.

One may well argue that the modern concept of imitative fine art has more coherence. (Or maybe not: There's a good case for re-evaluating mathematics' aesthetic dimension, not only for its relationship to harmony and proportion, but on its own, ever more expressive terms.) But there is no question about where the modern idea of fine-art appreciation ultimately comes from: It was created by the 17th-century European aristocracy. That group's understanding of art was based less on artistic expression than it was on the leisure class's refinement of character. In other words, the mere creator was secondary to the noble beholder.

Court life of the period was heavily influenced by the concept of the "courtier," especially as described by the diplomat and writer Baldassare Castiglione. This was a culture that celebrated the "arts" of studied behavior: mannered conversation, *baisemain* seduction, graceful athleticism (thus fencing), and an aestheticism based on the refined contemplation of art objects. That contemplative art culture operated according to rules described quite well by Rothstein. It was a culture in which the evaluation of art was guided by such undemocratic gauges as cultivated taste, extensive experience, and other marks of the leisure class.

The accelerating growth of markets in the 18th century shifted cultural power from the court to the city, invigorating the very idea of culture. But while the market proved itself an engine of creativity, it emerged as the

enemy of courtly "refinement," an idea that has survived. The rising capitalist bourgeoisie, in its effort to ape the old aristocracy, fashioned its own ideal of the "gentleman" largely from courtier leftovers. Its embrace of contemplative art and "refined" taste as standards of civilization is the foundation for the entire edifice of the elite arts as we still know them, from galleries to museums to endowments.

Rothstein is eloquently supporting a rich creative and critical tradition that has developed in many interesting directions. But there is nothing universal about that tradition. And contrary to his assumptions, culture isn't a fixed, unchanging condition. Nor is that his last mistake.

*Equality.* Rothstein argues that artists are persons apart from the mass and deserve to be treated as such. In this, he is joined by *New Republic* theater critic Robert Brustein. Brustein believes that it is outrageous that creative people should have to waste their time seeking money, that they have "to interrupt their creative labors to write, phone, fax and otherwise dun their political representatives" for continuing public funding. Such people, he argues, are a necessary and indispensable elite. "Without an elite in the arts, we have no leaders, which is to say we have no vision, which is to say we have no arts." Every possible accommodation must be given to such people, especially grants of money.

Artists *are* persons apart, of course. That said, it may be that others--nonartists--are entitled to make a similar claim. Nor is it clear, from one generation to another, who gets to be regarded as an artist. Certainly, artists satisfy a profound and demonstrable need for narrative and representation, sometimes inspiring centuries of passionate admiration and often creating the only lasting artifacts of their epochs. Still, the notion that self-identified artists must be on the public dole for *our* good as much as theirs is an entirely modern conceit.

Our cult of the artist is really a 19th-century phenomenon. Bereft of their aristocratic patrons--who had treated them with little respect or regard--Parisian artists in the wake of the French Revolution set themselves up as wild-man eccentrics, earning the nickname of "gypsies" or, in the French-derived term, "bohemians." Of course, there were always such fringe groups; the poet Horace describes figures in ancient Rome who seem recognizably bohemian. But the 19th-century appearance of these figures in an industrializing Europe coincided with the rise of a middle class made wealthy through trade and hungering for status. The deal these groups struck--the new-moned class underwrote artistry, thereby buying itself social position through "connoisseurship"--is mistaken by some for an iron rule of culture.

The manner in which this drama played itself out in the United States at the time set the terms of our contemporary debate. Just when popular American taste was challenging the entrenched cultural elite of the early 19th century, a class of merchants arose who, once they'd made their money, determined to use their fortunes for the benefit of *culture*. They established American business patronage, underwriting national artists, importing foreign *objets d'art*, lobbying for a national gallery, and laying the groundwork for a tradition of social and cultural philanthropy that lives on to this day in such organizations as the Rockefeller Foundation, the Getty Trust, and the Aspen Institute. But it is their *attitude* toward high culture that has cast the longest shadow. To quote the grocer Luman Reed, who when he died in the 1840s was supporting numerous painters and had become the first American to build a private gallery as a shrine to the cult of art, "[T]he artists are my friends, and [my money] is the means of encouragement and support to better men than myself."

Luman Reed's humble, hat-off attitude in the presence of self-proclaimed artistry is now equated by the cultural establishment with taste and social duty. Where did such a perception come from? The bohemians, Romantics, Decadents, and other anti-materialists advanced an image of the artist as a visionary who lives outside time. This construction of the artist, while immensely successful, is wholly unhistorical; art has more often been understood as the tool of its political, clerical, and bourgeois patrons. (Worse, this romantic construction inspired an often arbitrary critical history of art that has completely overshadowed the record of its actual, material development.) There is only one other period in which imaginative creativity has enjoyed the same quasi-mystical stature, and one has to go back to classical antiquity to find it.

The Greeks had a notion of poetry as divinely inspired by the Muses, a form of "divine madness" during which the poet was possessed by a holy daemon and was, literally, a person apart. This is not the invocation of the Muse one finds in Homer. Rather, the Greeks seem to have picked up art-as-madness later, from the shamanistic cultures of the Black Sea, and much of what we know about this idea comes directly from Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates delineates several kinds of madness, including the poetic variety.

The view of the poet as shaman has shown real resilience; its most eloquent modern defender was the 20th-century poet Robert Graves (who wrote his justly famous novels as money-making ventures to support his poet persona). At the least, the idea has considerable metaphoric appeal. After all, the psychology of creative inspiration remains materially unresolvable, a mystery in the classical sense of the term. Even so, the notion that daemonic poetic possession is a phenomenon amenable to the federal arts bureaucracy is a subject fit for Juvenal and his bitter satirical sense.

Indeed, the Platonic view of the matter is worth lingering over as one of the supreme ironies in Western cultural history. Our original source for the mystification of art--Plato--is the same figure who banished poets from his ideal

Republic. Although Plato apparently accepted the reality of poetic possession, he regarded it as inferior to reason. For Plato, reason too was a divine gift, another daemon, and a far superior one, according to classical scholar E.R. Dodds. To Plato, poets, daemon-infused or not, were to be shown the gate. These voluble figures--often unsure of the meaning of their own declamations--stirred public emotion when what was really wanted was tempered accord. They were thus the enemies of those who could be trusted to run things well: truth seekers; the best people. And that brings us to our final suspect in the reported murder of culture.

*Elitism.* This is the NEA's own culprit. By "enshrining art within the temples of culture--the museum, the concert hall, the proscenium stage," says the NEA's *American Canvas* report, "we may have lost touch with the spirit of art: its direct relevance to our lives."

Actually, everyone in this debate is targeting "elites" of one sort or another. Playwright Kushner attacks profiteers who constitute, in his view, a commercial elite muscling its way into the cultural sphere. Critics Rothstein and Brustein are both defending and celebrating what they perceive as an elite of talent and vision. They suggest that those who would criticize such an elite, and that now seems to include the endowment itself, are spiritual sans-culottes sneering at their betters.

But what the NEA is addressing--at least in this portion of its otherwise incoherent argument--is neither money nor vision; it is addressing status. The sociology of art and culture has been largely ignored, but it is the key to understanding the mounting problems of the nation's cultural elite.

Members of that group have failed to understand what is happening to them. Their problem isn't that somebody (profiteers) or something (the marketplace) is *undermining* culture. Their problem *is* culture. We are accustomed to identifying *culture* with the class that has long been its arbiter: the critics, publishers, editors, museum and gallery curators, theatrical impresarios, teachers, cultural historians, and others who have been the judges and gatekeepers of what is supposedly deserving, praiseworthy, and lasting, and what is merely "popular" and therefore disposable. The history of this class--and its power to dispose of the culture it deems inferior--is a very long one. In antiquity, for example, it created the Alexandrian Canon of 56 worthy poets, and the even more limited canon of the 10 Attic Orators whose voices we have been allowed to hear; we can only speculate on what has been lost as a result. (On the other hand, the old grammarians entirely ignored the popular Hellenistic proto-novelists such as Longus--from whose *Daphnis and Chloe* pastorella was born--that so influenced the Renaissance and ultimately our own literature when some of these works resurfaced.) The same class is still drawing up reading lists, only now their power of cultural enforcement is waning. Why?

The answer lies in the continuing diffusion of cultural power. When art moved from the court to the city in the 18th century (earlier in the case of Holland), the character of culture changed substantially. Creators were no longer beholden to their patrons; armed with talent (and developing copyright law), they could seek and address an audience of like-minded persons. They entered a market. This market could be both merciless and exploitive, but one result was an unprecedented explosion of creativity--fine, mediocre, and unspeakable--that is still continuing.

Another result, however, was the reorganization of cultural hierarchy. With the aristocracy irrelevant, a class of educated admirers--critics with cultivated taste--came forward to acknowledge the artists as visionaries and to offer themselves as their interpreters. This alliance of creators and critics, often in conjunction with business (later corporate) philanthropists making spiritual amends for their fortunes, has ever since been in control of the history, development, and instruction of cultural matters.

This control has been based not on any temporal power but on the enormous status that the cultural establishment had been allotted by the middlebrows. Just as the new-moned classes of industrialism sought to ape the aristocracy above them, the emerging middle classes sought to ape the culture of the stratum over their own heads. Having achieved material well-being, the middle classes sought culture, and culture, they agreed, was whatever the high-end establishment of critics, curators, and so forth said it was.

Thus, whatever a middlebrow audience in the middle of the 20th century may have enjoyed watching, hearing, or reading, it acknowledged that it should know third-stream jazz or the 12-tone music of Schönberg when it heard it; that it should have an opinion about what, if anything, happened in a film like *Last Year at Marienbad*; that it should appreciate pointed eventfulness in the plays of Samuel Beckett (or even the impossibility of drama in the films of Michelangelo Antonioni); that it should understand why New York painters were attempting to achieve absolute flatness; and that it should sample the latest efforts of European writers to produce the New Novel. The question of enjoying such things was really not an issue, as it had been when the fine arts were defined in the 18th century; culture by midcentury had become a matter of modernist intellectual heavy lifting. The striving middlebrow audience in its heyday would have been quite willing to admit that, for example, those films it did enjoy were probably of no lasting value anyway, even as it scanned the movie ads for a blurb from a serious film critic advising readers of the latest, must-see work of significance.

But today's serious film critics are largely beside the point, and the art films they praise (including work by such adventurous Eastern European directors as Emir Kusturica) draw small audiences on those occasions when they can even find a distributor. Cable TV offers scores of services, but the only dedicated elite cable service to survive is Bravo (and its Independent Film Channel). PBS's approach to opera is now dominated by famous tenors belting

out show tunes in sports stadiums. Literary fiction is famous for being unread, and even new work by such established writers as Thomas Pynchon creates little stir, however enthusiastic the reviews. Popular magazines are devoting less and less space to writers and artists, and serious general interest magazines can no longer support themselves. The role of the elite establishment is visibly shrinking.

Why? Cultivated elites are still there, but it is middlebrow culture that empowered them, and middlebrow culture is in steep decline. Technological innovation is redrawing culture's sociological map. Cable, VCRs, satellites, and the multidimensional changes wrought by the home computer have not only opened a vast array of new cultural choices to people, they are achieving something much larger: They are moving the consumption of culture out of the city and into the home. Cultural activity is becoming increasingly a private rather than a public matter, and the more culture is a private concern, the less status has anything to do with it. In private, people will immerse themselves in the culture they want. Thus culture--stripped of status concerns and reduced to authentic desire--is stranding elites in their own subculture.

What is going on at the top of the cultural ladder is even more obvious at the bottom, because at the bottom it isn't obscured by the elitist coverage of the surviving prestige press. At the bottom of the cultural hierarchy are such things as pornographic films. As recently as 20 years ago, porno films were a public issue. Their titles and contents were matters of public discussion, and the people who appeared in them could become notorious (as did Linda Lovelace) or even celebrated (as was Marilyn Chambers). But the VCR revolution has moved porno films almost completely into the home; they have less and less of a public dimension at all, beyond video store zoning battles. At this point, the films' makers and their audience constitute a self-contained subculture of interest primarily to themselves.

Something similar is happening on the top, avant-garde rung of the cultural ladder. (Indeed, exactly the same thing has happened to the once-lively repertory film circuit; classic films have become an at-home experience.) High culture, dominated, in the NEA's words, by the subsidized museum, concert hall, and proscenium stage, possesses its own obvious validity and exerts its own power. Whether anything happened in *Marienbad* may remain a legitimate cinematic question, at least as interesting as whether Agent Mulder is, yet again, dead. But there's no status cost in shrugging off such a question, and an increasing number of people have done so.

With cultural power dispersed, there are many such cultural subcultures asserting themselves. One man who recognized their validity long ago was sociologist Herbert J. Gans; he called them "taste cultures." In 1974, Gans offered a rare challenge to the standard cultural critique of negative classicism. There is nothing wrong, he argued, with a mass audience seeking pleasure in the mass media. It does not mean that that audience is to be despised, or that its imagination has been enslaved by cunning profiteers. It means only that different groups have different--and legitimate--cultural needs. Gans argued that the country featured numerous such cultures (he identified five, corresponding to class and income), and, in words that were to assure that his argument was completely ignored, added that "all taste classes are equal."

Gans was not suggesting that soap operas were interchangeable with Sophocles. But he did mean that measuring one by the other was a distortion of cultural reality, and in this he was right. Where he may have been wrong was to identify so few taste cultures and to suggest that people would spend their aesthetic lives inside only one. With gatekeepers gone and the gates wide open, people are as likely to wander around in many taste cultures; to move, for example, in both high art and pornographic circles. As historian Lisa Jardine points out, the Renaissance painter Titian, glory of Venice and purveyor of soft-core voluptuousness, was just such a figure.

As for those angry gatekeepers dressed in mourning, they might take comfort in contemplating their founding tastemaker, Baldassare Castiglione, and the fate of the courtier at the end of his world. Castiglione, arbiter of even-tempered cultivation and smooth wit, was also a man of worldly action--a papal envoy--and a disastrously bad one. His bumbling, based on conflating style with sincerity, was a factor in one of the great political and cultural catastrophes of his age, the terrible Sack of Rome in 1527. Revealingly, Castiglione emerged from that collision with reality by abandoning the very philosophy of character that so influenced later ages. The last letters he wrote before dying (of embarrassment, according to some) display a man of disfiguring temper and debasing bitterness. But then, the realization that the power of taste lies so entirely in the deference of others is an embittering epiphany. The last of the courtiers, his elegant progeny, are slouching off stage in bad temper. Give them credit for exiting in character.

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