

Sex, Art, and American Culture

By Camille Paglia

(Vintage, 337pp., US\$13)

Camille Paglia is a something of a renaissance woman, a Professor of Humanities at the University of Arts in Philadelphia, a verbose master of criticism, and a truly imaginative post-modern intellectual. Her style is witty, engaging, full of humour and passion, and cuts to the point with awe-inspiring ferocity. At times her prose reads more like Ginsberg's poem "Howl" than an academic essay, but this is precisely one of her strengths.

Her first book, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, was published in 1990, and received little notice until after the publication of an essay in the journal *Arion*. The essay was entitled "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf." This brilliant essay is the core of her latest book: a compilation of articles, essays, a lecture and an interview, entitled *Sex, Art, and American Culture*.

After the publication of "Junk Bonds" in 1991, and the paperback release of *Sexual Personae*, Paglia became a full-fledged phenomenon, appearing in various video and print media, as a self-styled defender of reason against a tyranny of post-structuralist art theorists, feminist zealots, and commissars of Political Correctness.

"Junk Bonds" is itself a book review of two books from the field of Gay Studies: *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, by David Halperin, and *The Constraints of Desire*, by John Winkler.

Both books are representative of the views and methods of Humanities scholars at leading universities. Both authors are post-structuralists, a class of scholars which emerged in the seventies and eighties inspired by the writings of several French scholars: Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Louis Althusser.

The post-structuralist approach, which like Marxism, claims to be "scientific," while displaying nothing but contempt for the scientific method, is based upon the interpretation of art or culture in terms of textual analysis and the process by which the "text" is deciphered. Feminist and Marxist scholars often apply the typically dense and problematic concepts of these hermeneutists in the fields of art criticism.

Paglia is merciless and unrestrained in her attack on Halperin and Winkler. Her wrath could even be termed Medea-like. She speaks with outrage at such academics, who in her analysis are self-serving get-rich-quick yuppies, the moral equivalent of junk bond dealers:

The French invasion of the seventies had nothing to do with leftism or genuine politics but everything to do

with good old-fashioned American capitalism, which liberal academics pretend to scorn. The collapse of the job market, due to recession and university retrenchment after the baby-boom era, caused economic hysteria. As faculties were cut, commercial self-packaging became a priority. Academics, never renowned for courage, fled beneath the safe umbrella of male authority and one-man rule: the French bigwigs offered to their disciples a soothing esoteric code and a sense of belonging to an elite, an intellectually superior unit, at a time when the market told academics they were useless and dispensable. It is comical that these vain, foolish and irrelevant people, so contemptuous of American society, imagine themselves to be leftists.

The academe's addiction to French post-structuralism has been at the expense of an entire generation's education in humanities, Paglia contends. This is something that I, as an art student during the early '80s would testify to as well:

Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault are the perfect prophets for the weak, anxious academic personality, trapped in verbal formulas and perennially defeated by circumstance. They offer a self-exculpating cosmic explanation for the normal professorial state of resentment, alienation, dithering passivity, and inaction. Their popularity illustrates the psychological gap between professors and students that has damaged so much undergraduate education.

After a relentless assault upon Halperin and Winkler, Foucault and Lacan, academic feminism and Marxism, in an attack that roams over a breathtaking battleground of ideas, she speaks prescriptively to graduate students about to enter the academe:

This is a time of enormous opportunity for you. There is an ossified political establishment of invested self-interest. Conformism and empty pieties dominate the academe. Rebel. Do not read Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and treat as insignificant nothings those that still prate of them. You need no contemporaries to interpret the present for you. Born here, alive now, you are modernity. You are the living link between past and future. Charge yourself with the high ideal of scholarship, connecting you to Alexandria and to the devoted, distinguished scholars who came before you. When you build on learning you build on rock. You become greater by a humility towards great things. Let your work follow its own organic rhythm. Seek no material return from it, and it will reward you with spiritual gold. Hate dogma. Shun careerists...Among the many important messages coming from African-American culture is this, from a hit song by Midnight Star:
"No parking, baby, no parking on the dance floor." All of civilized life is a dance, a fiction. You must learn the steps without becoming enslaved by them. Sitting out the dance is not an option.

This quote vividly illustrates Paglia's one-of-a-kind style, enthusiasm, and her

commitment to truth. She continues in this vein in her lecture given at M.I.T., entitled "Crisis in the American Universities." This lecture should be required reading for any university student. The rest of the book is made up of tantalizing and thought provoking essays on pop culture and such dangerous (thanks to Political Correctness) topics as date rape.

While some of her messages may infuriate, her ideas cannot be overlooked. She possesses a unique voice that demands the attention of anyone interested in culture and politics in the world today.

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