



Crisis in the Arts

Posted By Frontpagemag.com On February 7, 2014 @ 12:55 am In [Daily Mailer](#), [FrontPage](#)

Introduction: Conservatives tend to see our popular culture as a toxic waste site where traditional values—religion, family, patriotism, initiative and personal responsibility— are ferociously mocked 24/7. They see Hollywood as occupied by nihilistic leftists interested less in entertainment than in ideology and making films that ram radical ideas down our country’s throat. They see the arts generally as controlled by people who have contempt for the hopes and fears of ordinary middle class Americans, portraying them as a crass “booboisie.”

And in all these critiques, conservatives are right. Popular culture is at war with America and with the idea that ours is a good country, let alone a great one. The question is not whether this war is taking place, but whether we’re going to fight back.

That’s exactly the question Andrew Klavan, the best selling author of over a dozen works of fiction, addresses in *Crisis in the Arts: Why the Left Owns the Culture and How Conservatives can Begin to Take it Back*. Klavan shows that it is not enough for conservatives to bemoan the left’s hostile takeover of the culture or to withdraw from the culture because they see it as politically hostile and morally vulgar. Conservatives can win the culture war, but only if they put an army of culture warriors in the field, people who understand that enduring art is not about propaganda but about human striving and the struggle between good and evil. As Klavan writes, “For those conservatives with artistic talent and ambition this is a spectacular moment to take to the barricades... But to take advantage of this moment, conservatives have to come to grips with a situation that they naturally find uncomfortable: to wit, we are now the counter culture. We need to act like the rebels we now are and stop trying to win the favor of the big studios and publishers and mainstream reviewers. We need to make stuff. Good stuff. And get it out to the audience any way we can.”

Crisis in the Arts is a battle plan for fighting the culture war by a leading conservative who has been behind enemy lines with several *New York Times* best sellers and who refuses to cede our cultural heritage to people hostile to America.

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The Trouble With The Arts

By Andrew Klavan

“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, written 1821, published 1840.

“I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1916

“Politics is downstream of culture.” Origin unknown, frequently quoted by Andrew Breitbart.

When conservative activist Andrew Breitbart died in 2012 at the shockingly young age of 43, those of us who believe in liberty lost a rare conservative advocate for the arts.

“The people who have money, every four years at the last possible second, are told, ‘You need to give millions of dollars, because these four counties in Ohio are going to determine the election,’” Breitbart once said in a speech to the National Policy Council. “I am saying, why didn’t we invest 20 years ago in a movie studio in Hollywood, why didn’t we invest in creating television shows, why didn’t we create institutions that would reflect and affirm that which is good about America?”

Why indeed? Breitbart understood — what Shelley and James Joyce knew — that the conscience of a race is forged in the soul of a nation’s artists, and it is from that conscience that legislation and politics arise. By the time a fight becomes political — by the time its outcome depends on an election — it is often too late to win by means of rational argument. The battle has already been decided in movies and on television, in novels and in popular songs that, over time, create a general sense — an atmosphere — of what is right and what is wrong, what is cool and what is not, what it takes to be, in Joseph Conrad’s phrase, “one of us.”

Conservatives thrill to the cogent popularization of political ideas by talented broadcasters like Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, but Breitbart understood that, in the long run, all the good ideas in the world can’t combat the compelling narratives provided by the arts. Bring out the charts that demonstrate a free market creates more and better jobs than do government programs, prove mathematically that the wealthy spread prosperity more effectively than socialism, write treatises explaining that conservatives give more money to charity than liberals, that many women yearn to leave the workforce to keep house and raise children, that capitalism helps minorities, that most veterans are perfectly sane — it will all count for nothing. People already know that the rich are evil and the poor oppressed, all businessmen are corrupt, all conservatives greedy, all housewives are desperate, all soldiers go mad at the sight of war and so on. They know these things because they saw them, again and again, at the movies

Breitbart’s passion for reforming the arts made him lamentably uncommon in a conservative movement that too often succumbs to the self-righteous pleasures of philistinism, that too often wallows in the easy satisfaction of condemning the artistic creations of the left while never daring to try to match them with original content of its own. While right-wingers grump at

onscreen sex and nudity, or decry the rise of the anti-hero, or lament sympathetic mainstream depictions of gays, or sniff at scenes of violence and blasphemy and triumphant wickedness, the left marshals these eternally popular and, in fact, legitimate tools for dramatizing the human condition and utilizes them to sell nihilism, statism and socialism to the impressionable young.

“I don’t go to the movies anymore!” I often hear conservatives say. “They’re all garbage. What do I need them for when I can stay home and watch the classics on my big screen TV? John Wayne and Bette Davis — now there were movie stars for you! And modern novels? Why should I read all that foul language when I can go to my bookshelves and take down Dickens or Jane Austen any time I want? That’s good enough for me!”

No one expects conservatives or anyone else to patronize works of art they don’t enjoy or that offend their sensibilities, but you can’t win a fight by ceding the field. Conservative cultural ostriches are essentially abandoning those contemporary artists who might, at least in part, agree with them. With no audience to support them, creators with conservative, patriotic, religious or libertarian views are left to the mercy of dishonest and calculated attacks by the powerful leftist reviewers in the so-called “mainstream” venues. Their works are judged by the very people who have labored for the last sixty years to insure a virtual left wing monopoly over Hollywood, the publishing industry and other distributors of artistic content.

The simple fact is: You can’t tell the arts to get off your lawn. They aren’t going anywhere. They will continue to create the attitudes of the future — the conscience of the American race — while you hide your eyes in a self-righteous huff.

And cultural philistinism is not just a problem among rank-and-file conservatives. It is — even worse — endemic among our intellectuals. Consider conservative think tanks. As a vaccine against the virus of leftism that has been sweeping through our universities since the sixties, conservatives have created a network of research organizations where liberty-loving Big Brains can gather to study, write and speak. David Horowitz’s Freedom Center, the Heritage Foundation, CATO Institute, American Enterprise Institute, Manhattan Institute, Hoover Institution are all justly famous centers of conservative thought. Intellectuals at these places have done indispensable work on foreign policy, jurisprudence, municipal governance, constitutional law and more. But none of them centers its work on the arts and popular culture, not one. It was Breitbart’s dream to start such a cultural think tank; he told me so. He wanted to build a place in Los Angeles where aspiring right-wing movie makers and novelists could gather for fellowship and support. He didn’t live to see that dream through.

So as things are? If you want to hear an interview with the hot new musician, or a discussion about a brilliant new novel or an assessment of which new cable TV series is really breaking ground, you have to turn on NPR and swallow some government-funded socialism with your culture. *The Wall Street Journal*’s Saturday Review section, God bless it, is the only major review venue that will even give a fair shake to conservative-minded work. There are no major awards for patriotic authors and filmmakers. There are precious few grants that will support young or struggling artists of an openly conservative bent. Even the rare right-wing or patriotic film festival that springs up now and again always ends up favoring non-fiction documentary work, which is cheaper and easier to produce than narrative film.

Meanwhile, the left uses its considerable media power to shower politically sympathetic artists with praise and attention while doing its best to denigrate and blacklist the right. Powerful review venues like *The New York Times* laud even bad films and novels for their pro-left views while ignoring or attacking any work with openly right-wing sympathies. And while a brilliant leftist actor like Sean Penn can win the Oscars he deserves even though he's a brain-dead supporter of Communist tyrants, outspoken conservative talents like actor Kelsey Grammer, TV producer Joel Surnow and writer/director Cyrus Nowrasteh have all been snubbed, hounded or even censored for their political positions. Nicholson Baker can write a novel imagining the assassination of President George W. Bush and win praise but if even a rodeo clown makes a rude joke about Barack Obama, he is chased out of the business. You can't get barred from a project in Hollywood or New York for being a left-winger; you can be quietly, and even not so quietly, excluded from many projects for being on the right. Any artist who cares about his career knows which political side his bread is buttered on.

As a result, politically outspoken art is preponderantly left wing. Indeed, American history has been virtually rewritten at the movies. The real-life assassination of cold warrior president John F. Kennedy by a Communist was transformed into a murder-by-right-wing-conspiracy in the Oscar-winning Oliver Stone film *JFK*. Bill Clinton's adulterous Oval Office affair with a woman half his age was fictionalized as an age-appropriate, non-adulterous romance attacked (for some reason!) by evil right wing zealots in *The American President* — a film whose late 1995 release was timed perfectly to aid Clinton's re-election bid. As I write this, the number one box office hit is *The Butler* which dishonestly denigrates the impressive civil rights achievements of Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon while neglecting to mention that almost all opposition to truly effective civil rights advances came from Democrats.

And, in what was surely one of the movie industry's most shameful interludes, the George W. Bush-era American wars against our Islamist enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan were greeted by Hollywood with a parade of anti-war, anti-American propaganda. *The Valley of Elah* showed soldiers driven to homicidal insanity by participation in the Iraq conflict; *Green Zone* showed the war in Iraq to be the result of right wing lies; *Lions for Lambs* depicted the soldiers sent to Afghanistan as heroic fools misused by evil Republicans; *Rendition* showed an innocent American Muslim being kidnapped and tortured with the blessing of the CIA; the massively popular and equally idiotic *Avatar* was a thinly disguised tale of American troops wiping out native cultures, presumably like those in the middle east — and on and on. Even films that depicted American heroism like *The Hurt Locker* and *The Kingdom* were morally ambiguous when it came to America's role in the wars. And *Taking Chance*, a beautiful and deeply moving HBO movie that took no position on the war but lauded our warriors as heroes, was roundly lambasted by so-called "mainstream" critics as jingoistic.

What made all this so very despicable was that, for the first time in Hollywood's history, these powerful vehicles of anti-American propaganda were produced and released *while our soldiers were in the field in harm's way, fighting and dying* at the hands of low, hateful, tyrannical Islamist enemies. While Hollywood certainly did its best to disparage the Viet Nam War, almost all of the major anti-war films of that era came out *after* the American political left had helped engineer our defeat. By the time *Apocalypse Now* or *Platoon* hit the screens, the war was over, our soldiers safely home.

I visited Afghanistan briefly during the war and happened to witness firsthand how Taliban propaganda undermined American efforts to win local hearts and minds toward democratic governance. I found it heartbreaking to think that these murderous Islamist lowlifes were getting cinematic encouragement from left wing millionaires tut-tutting U.S. efforts at their cozy tables at the cafe in West Hollywood's Chateau Marmont. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with citizens opposing their government's wars — that's an important part of the democratic process. But it is wrong — very wrong — to produce powerful propaganda that undermines our military's efforts while a war is in progress. The freedom to make art does not absolve you from the responsibility of using its power morally. Hollywood's unbroken leftist attacks on our war effort could not have gone unanswered if conservatives had had a more prominent and outspoken role in the movie industry and the cultural media.

Now, some moviegoers may point out that there were wonderful conservative films produced in this era too. *The Dark Knight* trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *Toy Story 3* come immediately to mind. These movies showed both the necessity and moral complexity of battling evil and stood up for individual independence versus tyrannical statism. And unlike the anti-war films, which were nearly all third-rate bombs, these were excellent and hugely successful pictures which might well endure as classics.

But note another obvious difference. None of these films dealt with history head on. The Dark Knight movies, about comic book hero Batman, came closest, referring to their fantasy villains as "terrorists," and depicting a socialist movement very much like Occupy Wall Street. In the immediate sense, however, it's fair to say that conservative principles were generalized in these films and applied only in their thoroughly make-believe worlds. As I once joked, Batman had to wear a mask in *The Dark Knight* because if anyone found out he was really George W. Bush, the picture would not have gotten made.

At the movies — in the arts — conservative reality almost always comes disguised as fantasy whereas leftist fantasy comes disguised as reality! Conservative works put forward true principles. Leftist creations rewrite specific history. Conservatives are giddy with pleasure and relief when a popular novel or film doesn't thoroughly trash capitalism or sexual morality or faith in God. Meanwhile, the left wing writers of TV shows like *Law and Order* tear true stories from the headlines every single week and rewrite them to impose pro-left, anti-right values on their narratives. To cite but one example of many: in 2005, brain damaged Terri Schiavo was judicially starved to death at the request of her husband while evangelical Christian pro-life groups fought to save her. That same year, *Law and Order* produced a fictional version of the case in which an evangelical Christian engineered the murder of a Schiavo-like character's husband.

No matter how one feels about the issues of the case, the transformation of life-affirming evangelicals into murderers unfairly represents the right-wing Christian point of view. After all, only one person was killed in the real-life case, and it was Christians who battled to save her. A similar political transformation takes place on the show virtually every week, and always in one direction — leftward.

If you don't think leftists know the importance of using popular art to rewrite history, consider that the very rare films that look at historic reality from an even slightly conservative point of view are hounded from pillar to post by powerful left wing interests. Cyrus Nowrasteh's massively popular TV mini-series *The Path to 9/11* — which accurately portrayed Bill Clinton's politically-motivated failure to take out bin Laden before he struck so catastrophically on 9/11 — has, unprecedentedly, not been released on DVD because of pressure on the Disney Corporation by the Clinton gang. Joel Surnow's mini-series *The Kennedys* — only slightly critical of that sometimes criminal lefty political clan — was hounded off the popular History channel by Kennedy friends and relegated to a far more obscure cable station. And, of course, when Mel Gibson's beautiful *The Passion of the Christ* ignited a wave of faith-based excitement among evangelicals... well, what happened to Jesus in that movie was nothing compared to what left wing critics did to Mel!

Perhaps some will point out that left wing attempts to rewrite history are almost all commercial failures. But that, I'm afraid, is to miss the point. No one may have watched *Green Zone* or *Lions for Lambs* when they came out. But those movies will be available for home viewing forever. History grows old but art goes on living. To this day, Oliver Stone's completely wacky version of the Kennedy assassination is all the history of that era some young people know.

Former Ambassador Joseph Wilson got it just right. The so-called "scandal" involving his wife Valerie Plame — a meaningless bagatelle ginned up to a headline by a left-wing media out to destroy President George W. Bush — was re-written as a heroic left wing fight against a corrupt Republican administration for the 2010 Sean Penn vehicle *Fair Game*. When an interviewer pointed out that the film would probably die at the box office, Wilson responded, "For people who have short memories or don't read, this is the only way they will remember the period." Exactly.

This freedom to rewrite history in novels, movies and television shows while critics aid and abet the distortion of the truth — this left wing monopoly over not only the arts but the critical infrastructure that supports the arts — this is not the left's fault. They are only doing what leftists traditionally do: creating narratives to replace the facts and browbeating and blacklisting the opposition into silence.

No, this situation is the right's fault, our fault. We have allowed it to happen. It is just as Andrew Breitbart said: we focus our money and our intelligence and our attention on abstruse policies and last minute election number crunching while letting the longer game of conscience-creating culture go unattended. For conservatives, the present political situation is always an emergency that has to be attended to right now. If Obamacare passes, the Constitution is finished. If illegal immigrants win amnesty, the nation is doomed. If the military budget is cut, the world will spiral into chaos. All these statements may well be true, but while we are rushing off to stick our fingers in the latest hole in the nearest dyke, the very ground beneath our feet is being steadily eroded by both popular and highbrow culture. The left had our emergency attitude in the 1960's and 70's when they took to the streets — and they lost the White House to first Richard Nixon and finally Ronald Reagan. They learned from that mistake and began the famous "long march through the institutions," that transformed our culture even as we celebrated our political victories.

The right's response to the left's takeover of the arts has been panic, red-faced outrage, and stay-at-home philistinism. We have taken on the roles of cultural censors and scolds, longing for an idealized 1950's that wasn't real in the first place and, in any case, will never return. Such attitudes can, at best, inspire rearguard actions destined to failure.

Less obviously — but just as surely in my opinion — an active conservative art scene that strikes back with nothing but family-friendly entertainments containing good solid values and pro-American flag-waving will likewise ultimately result in conservative cultural irrelevance. Don't get me wrong; it would be great to have more of such content available. But ideas, like money, trickle down from the top, and the best thinkers want and need art that represents life in all its moral ambiguity and complexity. Sexuality, violence, darkness, perversion and evil are central aspects of the human condition and a culture that doesn't represent them will finally cause a reaction and be rejected as hypocritical and dishonest. Remember, the young Americans who so viciously attacked their country and its values in the 1960's and 70's grew up watching *Leave it to Beaver*, Doris Day and the later John Wayne! When confronted with imperfect American reality, they threw a nationwide tantrum attacking the good with the bad. The generations that *built* the fifties grew up in a much less saccharine artistic atmosphere.

How then can conservatives gain a greater voice in our culture and what would a more conservative culture look like? It is easy to respond to such questions with red meat cant that wins the frowning, nodding approval of right wing audiences. "Less nudity! More family fare! More patriotism! More God!" Such answers give conservatives a satisfying sense of righteous indignation, while guaranteeing long-run failure that will leave the arts in the hands of the left so they can do with them as they will. I would like to propose an approach that is more counter-intuitive to a conservative sensibility but also more strategic and more likely to succeed. Most importantly, it is more in sympathy with the endeavor of the arts themselves and therefore less likely to do damage to and impose restrictions on the free play of imagination, creation and appreciation that are the arts' great gifts and among the true pleasures of being alive.

What is Art?

"Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them." Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*

"If you want to send a message, use Western Union." Advice to storytellers, variously attributed.

One of the most frustrating and confusing experiences for conservatives is going to a work of art or pop culture and finding themselves enjoying as entertainment what, politically, is a slap in the face — or what Big Hollywood's John Nolte calls "a sucker punch." The recent Oscar-winning film *Argo*, directed and starring the talented and appealing left-winger Ben Affleck, was a thrilling history-based tale of escape with an all-American hero. It was also a dishonest rewrite of history that blamed U.S. and British meddling for the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979, carefully buried and sanitized Democrat president Jimmy Carter's fatal incompetence during the crisis and

eradicated the role of Ronald Reagan's election in bringing the crisis to a conclusion. For me, the fact that it was a good movie made its bad history all that much harder to swallow.

But in fact, it is silly and pinched to fight the allure of art for the sake of politics. No one wants to resist the sentimental tale of love and sacrifice in the hit film *Titanic* simply because the movie's historical inaccuracies are purposely crafted to convey a simplistic socialist message. Likewise, even the most sane and responsible young person might find herself singing along with a Katy Perry song that glamorizes and sanitizes teenaged drunkenness and promiscuity.

It's not wrong to want the art we enjoy to reflect our values — it's simply ineffective to battle a catchy tune and clever lyrics with a moralizing frown of disapproval. Da Smooth Baron MC had a point: you actually *can't* fight the rhythm. The left has triumphed in the arts because they know how the arts work. Before we can fight back, we have to understand what art is and what it's attempting to do.

Too often, political and religious people approach the arts as a means rather than an end. Art, they believe, exists to transmit messages — good messages rather than bad, their messages rather than the opposition's. They see storytelling, songwriting, picture painting and the like as “the spoonful of sugar,” that makes the medicine of wisdom go down.

This is a reductive approach and doesn't explain the mysterious power of culture. For one thing, many great and enduring works of art are, like life itself, open to several, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. Indeed, the greater a work of art, the more it seems to foil any attempt to reduce it to a single “inner meaning.” As a simple example, consider the enduring image of Big Brother from George Orwell's *1984*. Originally intended as the symbol of an oppressive Communist state, it is nowadays often used by Communist sympathizers to represent the overbearing incursions of right wing snooping. As annoying as this may be to us conservatives, we all realize that any oppressive government on either side can justly be accused of acting like Big Brother. Like all true art, *1984* is greater than its own intentions.

Consider too the eagerness with which people consume entertainment. They line up around the block to see a popular movie. They engage in intense, sometimes obsessive, speculation about the next episode of a cherished television show. From time to time, a novel will spread through one or another segment of the population like a more or less benevolent flu. Art and discussions about art are human universals, endemic to every society. We take this for granted, yet it's actually quite odd when you stop to think about it. As someone who has worked in the arts and loved the arts my whole life, I often find myself asking: why am I compelled to tell stories that aren't true about people who don't exist — and why should the audience listen to them?

The reductive notion of art as mere fable or parable does not account for the depth and power of our need for it. Neither, in my view, does Tolstoy's idea that art is a vehicle for transmitting feelings. Or that is, Tolstoy doesn't really address the question of why we want — why we *need* — to experience the feelings of some artist we have never met. Nor does he explain why some trashy art can evoke all kinds of emotions while the greatest art is sometimes not full of feeling at

all but rather has a certain cold quality about it, its power akin to the sternly perfect beauty of mathematics.

No, art's power to convey wisdom and its ability to communicate feeling make up only a small part of its overall purpose.

Art is a method of recording the ineffable inner experience of being human. There are no words that can directly describe what it is like to be self-consciously alive. Only symbols, stories, pictures and music can do it. The simplest person, when asked to convey the internal experience of an event, will either respond with something meaningless and emotionally incomprehensible ("It was the greatest thing ever!") or will resort to figurative language and metaphor. "It was like waking up on Christmas morning and seeing presents under the tree!" "It was like getting lost in a dark wood!" "It was like being called upon to avenge a murder and being paralyzed with indecision!" This is where stories — and pictures and songs — begin. They are the answers to the question: What's it *like* to be a human being?

The deeper, richer, and more complex the artist's answer to that question, the more universal and enduring his work of art becomes. The play *Hamlet* is a brilliant evocation of what it was like to be a thinking person at the historical moment when the once-universal moral truth of Catholicism was shattered by Reformation — but it is *so* brilliant, that it more or less predicts every emotional-philosophical dilemma that will arise from that intellectual cataclysm for the next five hundred years. Its depiction of the internal human moment is so complete that it becomes a depiction of all the moments that led up to it and all the moments that will come after it as well. It is the inner life of the modern West dramatized in a four hour play.

We need this. We need to tell and to hear the story of man's inner life — to write it down, paint it, film it, play it on the harpsichord or synthesizer — because it is our human nature and our human privilege to preserve what we learn and pass it on and build on top of it. No other animal can do that. It is possible no other animal has such a story to tell. I do not think my dog knows what it's like to be a dog. But, whether she does or not, she does not seem to be able to explain it to the dog next door. Animals seem to pass on only that information that travels through their genes and so animals can only grow and adapt through physical stimulus, through evolution. People write things down and preserve them and can therefore build on the ideas and learning of their predecessors. We write down how to make a wheel so our children won't have to reinvent it. We make art so that man's vision of himself might deepen over the centuries. A life without art is emotionally illiterate, an animal life that will, at best, be wasted reinventing the wheel of human wisdom.

So the purpose of art is not to edify or instruct, though it can instruct and often does edify. The purpose of art is not even to delight, though, if it's art, it will delight because that's its nature, that's the way it works. The purpose of art is to record and transmit the internal human experience. Great art does this greatly, bad art does it badly, pop art oftentimes does it sentimentally and superficially — but it is what all art is trying in its own way to do.

This may seem like distant philosophical speculation but, in fact, understanding art's purpose has practical implications and applications. It helps us to understand what a work of art is doing well

and what it is doing badly, and how a work of art that is somehow “good” (has a catchy tune or an affecting story) can also be used for bad purposes (lying about history or romanticizing debauchery). It also helps clarify what conservatives should want from the culture, and what they can do to get it.

When is Art Conservative?

The single biggest mistake conservative cultural warriors make is this: they expect a conservative culture to look conservative. It will not. If the purpose of culture is to record and convey the internal human experience in its entirety, it is going to record and convey a good many things of which we disapprove. There is simply no getting around the wickedness, corruption, greed, lust and sheer troublemaking goofiness lodged in the hearts of the best of us — and therefore, there is no getting around their entertainment value or their legitimacy as subjects for art.

Conservatives should definitely fight back against an artistic establishment in Hollywood and New York that refuses to elevate good values. There should be more TV shows and movies and novels that talk about happy families, decent businessmen, edifying religion, manly men and womanly women — all of which are currently being excised from the arts by left wing censorship and so-called political correctness.

But having said that, conservatives should have no problem with the art of darkness — if it is also the art of truth. Conservatives should not be afraid to make and praise art that depicts the worst aspects of human nature as long as it does so honestly — that is, in the context of the moral universe in which every choice has its price and every action has its consequences whether internal or external or both.

Take the HBO television series *The Sopranos*, for an example. It is a great show, revolutionary and brilliant. It would be easy and understandable for a conservative to take umbrage at the characters’ ceaseless barrage of foul language, their gleeful violence and empty, even sometimes abusive sexuality. But that would be to miss the exquisite complexity of the show’s moral vision. *The Sopranos* captures the joy of power and the temptations of violence but it also shows the brutal soul-destroying effects of the mobster life.

In one installment, entitled “From Where to Eternity,” Jesus Christ actually responds to a prayer. He grants a wounded gangster his life after first vouchsafing him a vision of the hell to which he’s undoubtedly bound. Another gangster in the episode is haunted by the spirits of the men he killed. The threat of eternal judgement hangs over everything. And yet, despite the evidence all around them, the gangsters ignore the moral promptings of the spirit. They go on killing and even celebrate the rewards they’ve won through their murderous and dishonest lifestyle: “God has been good to us!” It’s stunningly real, tragic and affecting.

Without moralizing, without bringing its bad characters to anything like justice, the writers present a vivid and true depiction of the way people behave and the consequences of that behavior. Whether you believe in Christ or not, whether you see hell as real or metaphorical, the series gives us a double vision of how evil is, on the one hand, exhilarating and seductive, and

how, on the other hand, it turns a person's soul to ashes. There is, undoubtedly, rollicking entertainment to be had in watching the characters do nasty things to one another, but the overall effect actually serves to deepen the viewers' moral vision of this complex and often wicked existence.

Think of it this way: a work of art is a world unto itself. It is responsible to the real world not in its individual symbols and events but only in its overall effect. Some evangelical Christians made the mistake of attacking the delightful Harry Potter novels because Potter is a wizard and wizardry and magic are against Christian teaching. But Potter's wizardry existed in a completely fantastical world that did not play by the same rules as the real world. In the context of *that* world, his fictional wizardry not only exemplified excellent moral values, it also laid the foundations for faith. The novels are deeply Christian when judged, not by their individual incidents, but by their overall effect. By condemning them, the evangelicals lost a hugely popular teaching tool.

Again, no one is required to consume art that offends his sensibilities. That isn't the point at all. People who are offended by cursing or violence or sex shouldn't watch television shows like *The Sopranos*. I like scary stories and I'm told *The Walking Dead* is a wonderful TV series about a zombie apocalypse. But I mostly watch TV at night and I don't particularly want to see animated corpses devouring human beings before I go to bed, so I take a pass. But I don't mistake my personal tastes for aesthetic or moral judgment.

Left to themselves, and without censorship from left or right, the arts in a free nation are naturally going to contain anything and everything that transmits the human experience. There will be excellent family fare, works of high-minded nobility and soaring expressions of religious feeling — but there'll also be plenty of rattling good stuff that's wild, sexy, violent, crazy and culture-critical. On first glance, these latter traits may seem to go against everything conservatives believe in — self-discipline, restraint, sanity and a respect for tradition — but they have to be judged in the context of the work of art's created world.

To me, conservative art is any art that honestly acknowledges the moral universe. There is such a thing as good and evil — if there were not there could be no action that was better or worse than any other. Who has experienced the world that way? No one. Not even the relativist college professors who teach such garbage to the young can truly believe it in fact. We all know that love is better than hate, freedom better than slavery, independence more essential to the soul than safety. Relativism — the sine qua non of modern leftism — is simply a lie.

But while good and evil are real, the human heart is not in harmony with them and never has been. To paraphrase Saint Paul, we do not always do the good we want to do, and the evil we don't want to do, we keep on doing. Because we are fallen creatures then, there is, in human life, a price for every choice we make and a consequence for every action. Marriage may be moral, but it is attended by frustrations. Adultery may be a thrill but it savages the people we love most. Criminals are evil but good men sometimes envy their freedom. Slavery destroys the soul but liberty is fraught with peril. Art needs to explore these tensions and we shouldn't be afraid when it does. After all, the founders of America did not create the Constitution because western culture had given them a simplistic happy-face view of human nature. They had read the

classics. They understood mankind. The document they created is a machine for delivering freedom not to the cast of *The Donna Reed Show* but to us, self-interested, corrupt, often stupid and wicked citizens that we are.

It is an honest view of human beings at odds with the moral universe that creates the conservative dedication to moral discipline, firm limits on the powerful, care for tradition and, most importantly, reverence for the individual's inner world and free choices. We do not need to be afraid of art that depicts the world honestly. It is only leftist lies we need to fear, because the truth — even the ugly, immoral, and thoroughly entertaining truth of human nature — is on our side.

Reclaiming the Culture

If we stop worrying about the unpleasant actions and events that take place in some art, if we stop fanning our faces over the evil characters who live in some imaginary worlds, if we stop bothering ourselves about the sex, the cursing and the violence on our movie and TV screens, we begin to see that the real trouble we face in the arts is two-fold: blacklisting and lies.

First, blacklisting.

The left uses its grip on Big Media to attack conservative culture. Even a well-loved production like *Downton Abbey* was called out by the press when its conservative leanings were descried. Less high profile works don't stand a chance against pre-emptive reviewer attacks.

The left uses its domination of the movie and book and art industries to keep conservatives out — ask any conservative who's been interrogated, insulted or outright silenced for "Creating while Conservative." All three have happened to me personally.

The left even uses political clout to chill the freedom of conservative expression — as when California Senator Dianne Feinstein threatened investigations against *Zero Dark Thirty* for its political incorrectness and thus, very likely, ruined its chance to win an Oscar.

We need to fight back.

For those conservatives with artistic talent and ambition, this is a spectacular moment to take to the barricades. Big Media is tottering under the assault of new technologies. With electronic publishing and social media, books can be self-published and self-promoted. With the new video cameras, professional-looking films can be produced on the cheap and distributed online. YouTube, iTunes, smart phones, tablets, blogs — all provide opportunities for new kinds of work and new ways for that work to be dispensed.

But to take advantage of this moment, conservatives have to come to grips with a situation that they naturally find uncomfortable: to wit, we are now the counter-culture. When it comes to the arts, Radical Leftists are The Man. We need to act like the rebels we now are and stop trying to win the favor of the big studios and publishers and mainstream reviewers. We need to make stuff. Good stuff. And get it out to the audience any way we can.

And those in the audience need to support the stuff that gets made. We don't have to hold our noses and praise artistic garbage because we agree with its politics; but we might stop preening ourselves on our blessed integrity and stop looking for ways to shoot down good work in order to show just how fair-minded we are. The film *300* was a wonderful piece of conservative pop culture, a brilliant use of video game style storytelling that celebrated the defense of western values at the battle of Thermopylae. I read conservatives criticizing the very over-the-top fantasy elements that made the movie a massive hit. I even heard some conservatives complain about the bare chests of the Greek warriors as if that made the film homoerotic. (Heaven forbid a film about ancient Greece should be homoerotic!) Did these right wing critics want the left to love them for their objectivity? To hell with the left. We need many more successes like *300*. Buy a ticket, applaud, go home. That's all you have to do.

Finally, for those conservatives with money, this is also a moment of opportunity, a moment when leftist censorship can be rolled back. Breitbart was right: we do need a movie studio. We also need publishing houses that don't just turn out right wing screeds but also produce literature. Equally important, we need an infra-structure welcoming to the arts: critical journals, cultural podcasts, radio and TV to counter NPR and Public Television, awards, award ceremonies, grants, appreciation. Artists work for love as much as money. Conservatives give them exactly none. We need to appreciate honest works that go beyond family fare and patriotic jingoism and Judeo-Christian piety. Next time you wonder how our culture went so wrong that a corrupt mediocrity like Barack Obama could win a second term as president, remember: it happened at the movies while you were giving your millions to political consultants. Play the long game; support the arts.

That's blacklisting. Now, lies.

The best defense against lies is not censorship but the truth. The best defense against dishonest art is honest art.

It's wonderful when terrific films like *Toy Story 3* and *The Dark Knight* express values conservatives can support. But there's simply no reason we can't make art about real life as well.

One doesn't have to be jingoistic or simplistic to tell a story wholeheartedly supporting war against Islamo-fascism. Why are there so few?

As I write this, *Law and Order* is planning a rewrite of the Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman case. I'm willing to bet it furthers the left wing narrative that this was a crime involving race when all the facts say otherwise. What story is the right telling about the case? Let me guess: none.

Republicans have supported most civil rights legislation; Democrat policies have ravaged African-American communities: tell good stories about that. (I did in *The Identity Man* — and, in an otherwise positive review, the *Wall Street Journal* scolded me for sounding a political note in a thriller novel! For shame.)

The left produces film after film, book after book, TV show after TV show demonizing conservative politicians, lying about conservative ideas, hagiographizing sleazy Democrats and rewriting history to edit out the terrible damage their policies have done. We don't need to answer propaganda with propaganda but there's no reason our stories can't include the historical truth — no reason except the fact that liberal venues will attack us and idiot conservatives will fret we're getting "too political." Yet the alternative is to accept the spread of the left's empire of lies.

We need to counteract another sort of lie in the arts as well: let's call it the lie of consequence. Some works of art, especially popular art, are a record of our daydreams. There's nothing harmful in that per se. Most men understand that if we really lived like James Bond, the broken bones and STD's would render our medical expenses ruinous. Most women know that an S&M relationship like the one in *50 Shades of Gray* would be more degrading (and painful) than it was worth. Yes, young boys need to be advised that fighting a Russian spy on top of a moving train can be hazardous to their health and young girls should be told that a relationship that begins with a beating is unlikely to end in a fairy tale romance. But the fact is, we all have fantasies that are anti-social, improper, ridiculous and unkind and there's nothing wrong with airing them out now and again. They're part of the human condition and I suspect that trying to suppress them only gives them more power over us.

But there are cultural works that use our fantasies to entice us into the worst of ourselves. Rap music that glamorizes murder and the abuse of women; torture-happy horror movies that lovingly portray the vivisection of living people; sexual pornography that hypnotizes us out of our humanity and can actually be addictive and life-destroying. While it has been one purpose of this essay to try to convince my fellow conservatives to eschew knee-jerk condemnation of artistic images that might at first offend them, I will not try to disguise the fact that I find these misuses of the arts I love to be pathetic and despicable.

As a matter of strategy if nothing else, however, I can only recommend that we respond to these emanations of original sin with criticism rather than censorship, and concern rather than outrage. Rappers who make money bragging about "killin' them bitches" and "dustin' some cops off," are cheap braggarts and liars, selling self-destruction as triumph. We are told that they are expressing the rage of the black streets. Who cares? An inarticulate shriek would do the same. Art — the honest record of the inner life — always operates truthfully in its context. These songs don't. The fact is: middle-class white kids bop to this garbage — and then, if they're lucky, they go home to see their law-abiding parents treat each other with respect and so learn better. A poor kid, especially a black kid in a community where intact families have all but vanished, is in far more peril of being swept on the rhythm of this self-aggrandizing filth into the dustbin of a wasted life. Nice going, soul-man.

The same charge of dishonesty can be brought against torture horror, that beguiles you into dehumanizing its victims, and porn, that beguiles you into dehumanizing yourself. (Feminist author Erica Jong once said that after watching pornography for ten minutes, she wanted to have sex; after watching for twenty minutes, she never wanted to have sex again as long as she lived. That's a clever and accurate description of how pornography works.) Lots of kids get a shrieky thrill from a bloody horror romp, and most men sneak a peek at naked lady pictures from

time to time, so over-reaction is always a counter-productive danger. I'm against censorship on principle and also because I think it's generally useless in the internet age. But thoughtful and passionate criticisms and dissections of the lies inherent in these genres can be powerful and can filter down to those who need to hear them. In the arts, to paraphrase St. Paul again, everything is permissible but not everything is helpful. When works of culture are anti-human, it's important to say so and explain why.

And, of course, this is where the makers of wholesome entertainments play a role. Depictions of men and women happy in relationship, depictions of families that are sources of strength rather than merely factories of neurosis, stories and songs that lift up the better angels of our nature may not appeal to the coastal critics and other self-proclaimed sophisticates, but they are important reinforcements of what we know to be true: faith, family and industry may seem restrictive — they may *be* restrictive — but they are, in fact, the surest paths to freedom and happiness.

In the end, however, critical attacks and negative reactions, while sometimes necessary, will always be our least effective tools. The arts can only be reclaimed by those who love them. Because the job of the arts is to say as much as possible — to say everything — about what it's like to be human, attempts to silence or curtail them will always be antithetical to the endeavor and likely to backfire. The arts are a positive enterprise, and positive action — creation, appreciation, support and praise — are the most powerful weapons a culture warrior possesses, and the ones that conservatives tend to use the least. The left censors and blacklists right wingers, but that's because they're in the wrong and can't abide disagreement. Conservatives should welcome all voices, because we're in the right and will win most arguments — and where we lose arguments, we should be willing to reconsider and change our minds.

The vision that inspired the American experiment in liberty was a vision created and preserved and handed down through works of western art and culture. It was a complex vision of man as a flawed creature in a moral universe striving toward the freedom for which he was made. The voice of that creature speaks to us over centuries in works as dark and bloody as the Greek tragedies and as bright and delightful as the American musicals, in symphonies and bagatelles, in doggerel and epic verse. Uncensored, that voice, intentionally or not, consciously or not, will always cry out for the very things conservatives most believe in: personal independence and lasting love, a good life today and a better life tomorrow, faith in a God who is no stranger to our suffering and who will yet become the father of our joy.

The arts, even at their least, are one of humanity's most noble enterprises. They have been hijacked by adherents of a low and oppressive ideology. We should take them back.

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