
WESTERN MAN'S EXPRESSION OF HIS SOUL: ART, MUSIC, LITERATURE, AND ENTERTAINMENT

In great art the technique fits the world view being presented....

Francis Schaeffer¹

The answer is: the whole thing is demonstratively, and unanswerably, a deception, or self-deception.

Robert Conquest²

Art opens even the chilled, darkened heart to high spiritual experience. Through the instrumentality of art we are sometimes sent—vaguely, briefly—insights which logical processes of thought cannot attain.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn³

When the ship is going down, the scum rises to the top, or so the old seafaring expression tells us in what could be a metaphor for much that occurs in a declining civilization. Nowhere perhaps is this as evident as early as in the visual arts, literature, music, cinema, and entertainment. All provide insights into the soul of a culture just as they offer glimpses of the inner workings of the minds and hearts of their creators. Attentiveness to these forms of social expression can tell us a lot.

The course that the arts and entertainment have taken in Western civilization is encapsulated in the West's experience with its most ubiquitous medium, television. In the mid-twentieth century the new technology was touted—where have we heard this before?—as a great advancement for mankind, not simply in the realm of technology itself, but as a basis for “education” and the advancement of knowledge. Though Uncle Miltie, as entertainment goes, was as tame by today's standards as anything found in a nunnery, we should have suspected that his presence betokened a future for television that was far more frivolous than profound.

But even the most insightful social observer could not have guessed that within the span of two generations television would become the effluent end of a giant sewer system where all manner of human pathologies and debased behavior would be treated not as cautionary spectacle to educate, frighten, and repel, but as entertainment.

Western man was indeed “uplifted” and “educated” by television, but the lift was on a sea of effluvia and the education has been an advanced study in human depravity and how-to-become-jaded-by-as-early-as-mid-adolescence—if not sooner. Innocence in experience and nobility in aspirations—the

Milton Berle as Cleopatra. *In the mid-twentieth-century, television was touted as a great advancement for “education” and knowledge. Though Uncle Miltie (Milton Berle), as entertainment goes, was as tame by today’s standards as anything found in a nunnery, we should have suspected that his presence betokened a future for television that was more frivolous than profound. Within two generations television became the effluent end of a giant sewer system where human pathologies and debased behavior would be treated as entertainment.*



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virtues and values of an exalted life—were supplanted by sordid experience and self-centered lusts.

Of course, in the realm of entertainment, movies were the progenitors of most of it: Feeling a certain freedom (i.e., license) to market whatever they liked in pursuit of the dollar, the pound, the franc, the deutschmark, and now the euro, producers, writers, and directors did not, and do not, typically treat their audiences to painful lessons in the consequences and the shame of self-centered and debased behavior, but, in so many ways and so many attractive guises, either depict such behavior for entertainment—à la Colosseum—or even uplift it as patterns by which to model one’s life and priorities—all without fear of antipathy and with confidence in the audience’s approbation, and, most especially, its revenues.

The debasement of art and entertainment as moral teachers was evident to more astute observers as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. But even leaders of the dominant religion of the West in the Christian church did not perceive the extent or true nature of it. Josef von Sternberg’s 1929 German film, *The Blue Angel*, dwelt on the theme of individual sexual obsession but was a harbinger of a coming cinematic—and eventually cultural—obsession as well. In America the infection could be readily found in the cinema of the 30s and 40s, a time of reputed innocence. In the 1939 movie *Gone With the Wind*, the character Rhett Butler’s infamous “damn” was roundly and nearly universally damned by churches in America. Countless words were spilled in print and preaching inveighing against this singular profanity. Yet scarcely anyone noted that the two deliberately and contrivedly attractive central characters were, variously or congruently, adulterous, ruthless, implacably self-centered, utterly materialistic, and devoid of any evidence of regard for a higher moral authority. Their “love,” such as it was, ostensibly elevated them above the common herd. Their personas reflected more of their creators’ thoughts and values—and the damage being done to the national psyche and character—than one four-letter word ever could. The insidious seeds were already there—even in the earliest days of the cinema, before Rhett could be heard to utter a word—but they were glossed over with the false chimera and meretricious charms that come so easily to the filmmaker’s “art.”



Photograph by Hulton Archive/Getty Images

*The 1929 German film *The Blue Angel*, which made Marlene Dietrich a star, dwelt on the theme of sexual obsession but was a harbinger of a coming cinematic and cultural obsession as well. In America, the infection could be readily found in the cinema of the 30s and 40s, a time of reputed innocence. Western cinema has only rarely led man to see his own depravity and weaknesses, much less to surmount them, but rather often to nurture them and treat them even as valuable and attractive assets and experiences.*

If we define art as a creative form of expression that uplifts man and grants him greater insight into his true condition, with a corollary encouragement to rise above it—a definition far closer to my own—then much of recent Western art and entertainment has been an abysmal failure. Worse still, it has done just the opposite: led man to not see his own depravity and weaknesses, much less to surmount them, but rather often to nurture them and treat them even as valuable and attractive assets and experiences.

SEX AND THE SINGLE CIVILIZATION

The more decadent it becomes, the more imitative it grows and the swifter becomes the tempo of the successive phases of the process.
Pitirim Sorokin⁴

Francis Schaeffer focused heavily on the arts when writing of contemporary Western culture. Referring to Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) and the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788), Schaeffer cited Gibbon's often-quoted five key indicators of the dissipated state of the Romans. Among them were “an obsession with sex” and “freakishness in the arts, masquerading as originality, and enthusiasms pretending to be creativity...”⁵ “As the Empire ground down, the decadent Romans were given to a thirst for violence and a gratification of the senses. This is especially evident in their rampant sexuality.”⁶

That Gibbon's observation of “an obsession with sex” as a characteristic of a culture in advanced decay should be mentioned in a chapter on art and entertainment in the Western world, should not come as a surprise.