

## The Arts and Popular Culture After 9/11

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It's been nearly 15 years since the attacks of September 11, 2001. With the rise of Islamic terrorist groups like ISIS, and the tragedies late last year in Paris and San Bernardino, Americans continue to seek answers and insights to make sense of the heinous acts that have changed their lives in unthinkable ways.

As we learned more about Islam and the resentments many in the Arab world directed toward the West, it became apparent that a serious point of contention among Muslims — fundamentalists and moderates — was the pervasive influence of Western popular culture in the Muslim world. This has resulted in a spate of collective soul searching as the motivations of artists, producers and production entities were called into question in ways that heretofore had rarely been experienced.

Weighed against long-standing American support of Israel, or other Western economic or geopolitical influences, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which Western cultural and artistic endeavors actually have had on breeding the resentments that motivated the planners of 9/11 and later attacks. Yet it cannot be denied that the influence of certain cultural expressions produced by our commercially-oriented and highly secularized entertainment industry have contributed significantly to the antagonisms Muslims feel toward the West in general and the United States in particular.



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In his 1951 tome, *Milestones*, the Egyptian Muslim scholar, Sayyid Qutb, wrote extensively about what he viewed as the hypocrisies of Western Christian culture, especially racism and sexual immoderation. Qutb's indictments regarding the secularization and immorality of the West and its "pagan ignorance and rebellion against God" became the seeds of radical Islamic resentment. In *Milestones*, he states:

*Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice... because humanity is devoid of those vital values which are necessary not only for its healthy development but also for its real progress. Even the Western world realizes that Western civilization is unable to present any healthy values for the guidance of mankind.... Islam is the only system [that] possesses these values and this way of life. The Islamic civilization can take various forms in its material and*

*organizational structure, but the principles and values on which it is based are eternal and unchangeable.*

Other Muslims have echoed Qutb's criticisms of the Christian West. However, because the views Qutb expressed in *Milestones* were based on his two-year stint as a student in the United States just after World War II, his views were seen as being highly credible.

In another essay, "The America that I've Seen," Qutb expresses disdain for just about everything in America, from sexual attitudes to the cinema, football, gravy, barbershops, clothing, and jazz, which he characterizes as "music that a savage bushman created to satisfy their primitive desires." Because of his outspoken derision of American culture, he is considered by many to be the spiritual father of radical Islamic jihad.

As our world community seeks ways to ameliorate the antagonisms that create resentment among many in the Arab world, discussions inevitably turn to the cultural expressions of the West and those responsible for producing them. The debate regarding the entertainment industry and how it may need to come to terms with itself in a climate of heightened anger, resentment and rage is now in full cry.

### Appropriate Responses

Opinions from the arts community about this issue are obviously as diverse and impassioned as the artists themselves; some more well-reasoned than others. In the weeks following 9/11, *The New York Times* asked artists from a variety of disciplines what an appropriate response might be by those who create, produce and perform. In a provocative *Times* essay, iconic songwriter Paul Simon calls for "a higher standard of honesty" and an "artistic and spiritual rebirth" in our society. He also advocates a move away from corporate, bottom-line motivations and encouraged reexamining ourselves as a people and a

culture:

The nihilism and violence that are often found in our music and film should be recognized as the cynical entertainment that they are when contrasted with the reality of Sept. 11. The firefighters and police who worked 24-hour shifts were real-life heroes, completely alien to the popular culture's idea of heroism. Artists should feel comfortable with this non-show-biz reality, and let it be reflected in their work. The marketplace can accommodate these truths without losing money. Our notions of profit and value could be adjusted to allow for a greater degree of artistic questioning without an implication that such actions would automatically have adverse economic consequences. Artists could hold themselves to a higher standard of honesty.



*Singer-songwriter Paul Simon*

HBO producer Tom Fontana writes that the events of 9/11 “means figuring out where the United States fits in the global family... examining the roots of intolerance, of fanaticism, of hate. This means understanding the importance of neighbors, co-workers, relatives, friends and faith.” Offering a countervailing perspective, *Time* magazine contributing editor, Lance Morrow, characterizes those seeking root causes for the 9/11 attacks as “too philosophical for decent company.”

Music historian David Tame observes that all civilizations have been confronted with the choices between art and music that denigrate and/or music that “encourages the contemplation of the eternal verities.” Those

choices are, in some ways, a microcosm of the history of civilization itself. Tame notes that when corrupting or degrading music appears within a culture, it happens very suddenly and with almost cataclysmic results. Destructive music “attains to a position of power and of widespread popularity with the masses within just a few years or decades; and its influence upon society in general is often similarly sudden, bringing swift and negative change in philosophies, politics, morals and lifestyles.”

We need only to look at our own contemporary age to see evidence of this. In the context of current popular art forms, George Carlin's referencing the “seven dirty words you can never say on television” now seems like a quaint aphorism.

In light of Simon's comments, an honest assessment requires us to admit that our popular culture is in need of moral re-assessment. The erosion of our moral and ethical perspectives as well as the insensitivities towards others, has led to a moral relativism that many in our world community see as being contemptible — or worse. Perhaps Qutb's observations should have been a wake-up call for the West, for they certainly were for Islamic radicals.

### **The Role of Artists**

Still, questions remain: What roles do the arts and artists play in creating a moral and ethical society? Do creators and producers bear any responsibility for the antagonisms that cause resentment and hatred in our world community? Should art be exempt from moral assessment? Do “absolute” moral and ethical truths that can be applied to an artistic enterprise actually exist? There is a prevalent notion among many in the arts community that freedom of artistic expression is sacrosanct and, as such, artists should not be subjected to any culpability as to how their art influences social mores.

Musicologist Richard Taruskin refers to this as the “poietic fallacy,” a condition in which art is assessed exclusively by methodological concerns without regard to its moral implications or aesthetics. Of course, arriving at a consensus as to how a civilized society applies axiological considerations to art can be highly subjective and a deeply vexatious endeavor. Whose values should we apply to this process? Perhaps a more appropriate question would be: What values should we apply?

In the 21st century, it is undeniable that the pervasiveness of the more depraved aspects of popular culture and the values it engenders has had a corrosive and dehumanizing effect on society. In light of the current reality of Western popular culture, “art music” has become increasingly marginalized. In fact, the word “art” has been trivialized as the lines between trend and tradition, the profound and the superficial, truth and cliché, are increasingly indistinct. This is due in large part to the corporate, bottom-line motivations that Simon alludes to.

The pervasiveness of much of the West's depraved and nihilistic popular culture, combined with the

“hyperbolic and aggressive selling” of such, makes holding a position of moral integrity difficult, if not impossible. It’s important to make distinctions between freedom and license, as well. Changes are necessary, but change is a process, not an event. We must begin the process in earnest and holding the moral high ground requires doing more than just condemning evil. Living according to high virtues is a *sine qua non*. Taruskin observes:

If terrorism — specifically, the commission or advocacy of deliberate acts of deadly violence directed randomly at the innocent — is to be defeated, world public opinion has to be turned decisively against it. The only way to do that is to focus resolutely on the acts rather than their claimed (or conjectured) motivations, and to characterize all such acts, whatever their motivation, as crimes. This means no longer romanticizing terrorists as Robin Hoods and no longer idealizing their deeds as rough poetic justice. If we indulge such notions when we happen to agree or sympathize with the aims, then we have forfeited the moral ground from which any such acts can be convincingly condemned.

Condemnation is an appropriate starting point, but taking responsibility is a necessary aspect of the end game. The hope of all ages has been a world of peace: a world free from hostility and prejudice. Most artists I know identify with that ideal, some more passionately than others, to be sure.

Still, many believe that art should manifest qualities of altruism and humanity and be at the forefront of any “moral revolution” in the world. Calls for censorship are not the answer. Defending civil liberties and freedom of expression is imperative in cultivating a healthy, pluralistic society. In fact, freedom is fundamental in the practice of love and peace. The only form of censorship necessary or acceptable is self-censorship — a condition in which individuals assess what they create through a filter of altruism.

This attitude seems to place the onus of moral and/or ethical responsibility squarely in the arena of creative individuals. Pluralism cuts both ways; thus calls for a more humane creative ideal should not be considered expressions of oppression or intolerance, but rather a call to become less “endarkened” and more enlightened. Without discretion, tolerance can lead to licentiousness, not to mention a great deal of bad behavior and questionable art.

If there is a silver lining in the tragedies of 9/11, Paris, and other attacks, perhaps it is that the window of opportunity now wide open will allow a serious period for a more sober and enlightened examination in assessing the roles of art and artists in creating a culture of peace. To paraphrase Fontana, that may well mean coming to an acute awareness as to how artists can best fit into the global family.

It is undeniable that artists will have a significant role to play in the process of change, but how can they play that role remains every artist’s challenge. Why settle for less than that which is beneficial to one’s society? Why create that which denigrates our collective humanity? Artists have choices to make and the raising of consciousness among the arts community is one way to begin the process of ascertaining what might be considered a morally upright and humane cultural perspective. The proposition that we would do well to *share* what we create and produce in the spirit of brotherhood and altruism seems especially relevant today.

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Image at top: *A stylistic representation of the Super Bowl 50 halftime entertainment, seen by a huge global audience.*