



PROFILE

CAMILLE PAGLIA

She's the out of control ego at the back of the classroom; the budding student politician who's always bending your ear in the university bar; the loudmouth video clip director sitting next to you on an international flight; the friend who critiques the movie while you're watching it.

If she was a noise, she'd be an electric sander in the apartment next door, relentless, high-pitched and impossible to ignore. As it is, she compares herself favourably to both Simone de Beauvoir and Madonna. For the past two years, Camille Paglia, Professor of Humanities at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and controversial author, has been making a living irritating the hell out of practically any ideology which wanders into her sights. Here she is on feminism:

Contemporary feminists, who are generally poor or narrowly trained scholars, insist on viewing history as a weepy scenario of male oppression and female victimisation. But it is more accurate to see men, driven by sexual anxiety away from their mothers, forming group alliances by male bonding to create the complex structures of society, art, science and technology.

And here she is again on conservative family values:

Gay men are the guardians of the masculine impulse. To have anonymous sex in a dark alleyway is to pay homage to the dream of male freedom... Similarly, straight men who visit prostitutes are valiantly striving to keep sex free from emotion, duty, family—in other words, from society, religion and procreative Mother Nature.

A self-proclaimed bisexual feminist, Paglia has little sympathy for either the Left or the Right. Indeed, she argues that the liberal-conservative binary no longer holds. Speaking at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1991 she told her audience: "The liberal and conservative dichotomy is

dead. The last time it was authentic was in the 50s, when there really was an adversarial voice coming out of people I really respected, the New York Jewish intellectuals like Lionel Trilling and the people of *Partisan Review*."

A child of the 60s revolution herself, Paglia argues that her generation squandered its intellectual inheritance with excesses and built, in the place of a true revolutionary consciousness, a hollow shrine to political correctness. Her targets are liberal scholars and their courses—the gamut of post-60s humanities fodder, from standard Marxist-feminist critiques through to poststructuralist models. Superficially, there's little to distinguish her rapid-fire attacks on the new liberal orthodoxy from those of disgruntled academic traditionalists. What differentiates her, however, is not rhetoric but speaking position.

Paglia talks as an insider, a feminist/lesbian scholar who is no relation to the WASP-dominated culture of Ivy League conservatism in the US academies. Her criticisms, accordingly, have that special brand of venom which defectors reserve for their former compatriots. In her two recent bestsellers *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* and *Sex, Art and American Culture* she lets fly with two decades of pent-up aggression. The results are variable. At their worst her theories are simplistic and her criticisms petulant; but at her best, Paglia manages to land some long-awaited blows for common sense.

In *Sex, Art and American Culture*, Paglia kills two sitting ducks with one essay. 'The Joy of Presbyterian Sex' takes apart an earnest document released by the Special

Committee on Human Sexuality of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The report, titled *Keeping Body and Soul Together*, caused a stir on its release by recommending radical change in traditional Christian attitudes towards sexual behaviour, specifically endorsing extramarital relationships and homosexuality. Its contents are a perfect vehicle for Paglia to demonstrate the WASPish moralism which lurks at the heart of much contemporary leftist liberalism.

The well-intentioned report in question proceeds from a premise of "the basic goodness of sexuality". (It is a vision which, Paglia notes, "would have made Doris Day and Debbie Reynolds—those 50s blonde divas—proud".) Departing from this optimistic view of sexuality, the report proceeds to apply a feminist-Marxist critique to contemporary sexual politics, targeting "our cultural captivity to a patriarchal model of sexuality and its ethic of sexual control". Christian values, it argues, demand that marginalised groups are treated with tolerance. The ultimate vision is of a "nonpatriarchal future" where everyone can get along free of discrimination.

In this revised Christian brotherhood, newly purged of racist, sexist and homophobic overtones, Paglia discerns something smelly, however: "the revival of the old Protestant ethic, masquerading in new, hip clothes". The report, she says, gives us

vanilla sex, smothered with artificial butter-scotch syrup. In its liberal zeal to understand, to accept, to heal, it reduces the grand tragicomedy of love and lust to a Hallmark card. Its unctuous normalising of dissident sex is imperialistic and



oppressive. The gay world is stripped of its outlaw adventures in toilets, alleyways, trucks and orgy rooms... This is censorship in the name of liberal benevolence.

Paglia discerns the same trimmed-lawn view of sex and emotion in much feminist ideology. Central to this repression, she argues, is a reluctance to engage aesthetics or psychoanalysis. The result is a feminist politics which has failed to come to terms with beauty or pleasure and can only fall back on a monolithic view of lust as something men 'do' to women.

Strip back the hysterical cant, and Paglia is on to something. Indeed, she's managed to popularise a debate which has been raging internally in

the women's movement for the past decade. As Australian feminist scholar, Elizabeth Grosz noted recently in an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, many feminists disagree strongly with the essentialist critique of patriarchy popularised by authors such as Naomi Woolf. Says Grosz: "Woolf is part of a return to telling women what they should or shouldn't be doing. She sets up an appearance-reality split which I find deeply disturbing because it presumes that we have layers of appearance we can peel off and get to the 'real' woman or person underneath."

Grosz's comment fingers something dear to Paglia's heart: the centrality of the mask to Western philosophy and, in particular, aesthetics.

The title of her major work, *Sexual Personae*, was inspired by Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona*, meaning literally clay or wooden masks worn by actors in Greek or Roman theatre. Western personality, Paglia argues, originates in the idea of mask, and society is "the place of masks, a ritual theatre". Underlying this theatre, Paglia discerns an age-old drama, the conflict of reason and nature.

In an abandoned preface to *Sexual Personae*, she wrote: "Civilisation is an ethical stronghold, the Appollonian palace that reason has built ... Sadean nature, the dark hero of *Sexual Personae*, is the Dionysian ... raw, brute, earthpower". In Paglia's thesis, the gross continuum of nature lurks just below the

surface of culture always threatening to spill over. The nature-culture split is a well-worn dichotomy, but it explains why she has little sympathy with liberal attacks on Western reason and culture. In their zeal to critique the rigidity and hierarchical logic of patriarchy, Paglia argues that liberals have fallen into the trap of romanticising nature and forgetting the pagan chaos of the swamp from which we emerged.

It's an old thesis based on an essentialist view of history, nature and culture. And, ironically, it's one which leads Paglia down the same path of crude biologically-based distinctions which the feminists she criticises have followed. Despite her own calls for greater scholarly rigour and her claims that modern humanities academics are poorly or narrowly trained, Paglia's own intellectual inquiries ultimately lack depth or consistency. Her engine is reactive rather than inventive.

Despite this major weakness, however, Paglia does have something to offer current debates. Her brutal honesty is a welcome relief from the pussy-footing self-justification which often passes for analysis in cultural studies and theory forums these days. In an era where oppositions seem to be dissolving, where it's getting harder to tell your left from right, Paglia's brand of hysterical opposition is a strangely appropriate antidote. As a theorist she has a lot in common with the 60s rock 'n' roll she loves so much—it's a raw, angry energy which refuses to be fed pacifying words. And, in this sense, she may be just the irritant contemporary liberal debate needs. ■

CATHARINE LUMBY is a Sydney freelance journalist.