

Camille Paglia's Ambiguous Critical Legacy

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Camille Paglia is two thinkers in one: a theorist of sexuality and a critic of art, literature, and culture. She believes that modern society needs theory to counter feminism and other dominant ideologies, and criticism to explain and promote culture in its many forms. As worthy as each of these goals are, Paglia's attempt to pursue them together has produced a tension in her work, to the particular detriment of her criticism. Paglia's most effective critical works are those that keep theory at arm's length. And she is far more insightful about sexuality when bringing her views to bear on current controversies instead of developing them via analyses of William Blake and *The Faerie Queene*. Paglia rose to fame mainly on the strength of her work on sexuality, even though four of her six books are works of criticism. The public's judgment is right. At least thus far in her career, Paglia is a critic of great talent but modest achievements.

Sexual Theory

Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson, Paglia's best-known work, argues for the "unity and continuity of western culture."¹ Like the post-Rousseauian Romantics, she turns to nature to explain culture, though she rejects their view of nature as "benign," insisting instead on its harshness and indifference. Man is one species among many "upon which

¹Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1990), xiii. All further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

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nature indiscriminately exerts its force" (1). Man *creates* culture out of a rebellion against nature's drift toward disorder. Art, politics, architecture, science, technology, and medicine—all are rooted in a "swerve" away from the reality of "chthonic" nature. "Everything great in western civilization has come from struggle against our origins" (40). Civilization is artificial and transient. Total victory over nature is impossible. But even if there's no progress in the fullest sense of the term, history is unified and continuous because of sexuality's position at the "intricate intersection of nature and culture" (1). Males lead the rebellion against nature, while female desire is the primary instrument through which nature tries to smother humanity in formlessness.²

Paglia's sexual theory is complex in its full elaboration, but is founded on the premises that sex is a power struggle—"Lust is the medium by which each sex tries to enslave the other" (185)—and the traditional understanding of the differences between men and women is generally accurate.³ The theory is set mainly in opposition to feminism. Paglia's implacable disdain for feminist thinkers, evident throughout all her works,⁴ stems from two core beliefs: (1) there is nothing more important to understand about human nature than sexuality, and (2) in modern times, feminists pose the greatest obstacle to an adequate understanding of sexuality. Paglia insists that male and female differ because of nature, not society. Feminism gets the relation between society and nature completely backwards.⁵ Nature oppresses women through the reproductive process, which is much less burdensome on men. Society, along with capitalism and modern technology, has liberated women. Paglia frequently makes clear that she supports gender equality in a political sense, but she cannot accept sameness. Nor does she believe that it was simply an accident that Western civilization was created almost exclusively by men, whose desire, when repressed, manipulated, or overcome, can lead to great heights of cultural achievement or amazing depravity.⁶ Sex cannot ever be "safe," because it brings otherwise acculturated men and women back into contact with raw, untamable nature. That's where the "sizzle" comes from.⁷ The potential for rape, domestic violence, and other

²"There is no sex without yielding to nature. And nature is a female domain." Ibid., 287.

³Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 108: "I have been led by my studies to reaffirm the most archaic myths about male and female. I aim to recover the truth in sexual stereotypes."

⁴"Every year, feminists provide more and more evidence for the old charge that women can neither think nor write." Ibid., 244.

⁵"The rapist is created not by bad social influences but by a failure of social conditioning." Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 2.

⁶"There is no female Mozart because there is no female Jack the Ripper." Ibid., 247.

⁷Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 57–59.

sex-related crimes will never be completely eradicated because nature cannot be eradicated.

“Personae” are “modes of personality” somehow defined by their disposition toward sexuality. While writers such as Plutarch and Winston Churchill are known for their “great man” interpretations of political history, Paglia enumerates what she considers the great personality types of Western art and civilization. “From remotest antiquity, western art has been a parade of sexual personae” (39, 199). Paglia is profoundly interested in how some people can command fascination and authority simply by having a striking personality.⁸ This represents for her a great *artistic* achievement, since personalities are not found in nature, nor really, for that matter, outside the West.⁹ Sexual personae emerge from and express the ceaseless battle to overcome nature. It’s obvious how man seeks mastery over nature through medicine and engineering. *Sexual Personae* argues that creating a beautiful personality should also be understood as an attempt to overcome nature.¹⁰ Beauty is not just unnatural—because nature, being formless, is ugly¹¹—but anti-nature.¹²

Examples of sexual personae include the beautiful boy, the dandy, the shaman, the liberated woman, the vampire, the court Hermaphrodite, the man of beauty, the femme fatale, the male heroine, the Great Mother. Through *Sexual Personae*’s more than seven hundred pages, she abstracts these “archetypes” from mythology, drama, sculpture, painting, literature, and lyric and epic poetry. It’s important, for Paglia’s overarching thesis, that the sexual personae recur throughout a wide variety of aesthetic epochs (Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Renaissance, Romantic) and that they be limited in number.¹³ In *Sexual Personae*, Paglia darts through three thousand years of Western civilization

⁸Ibid., 104–5.

⁹Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 3: “Nature is a hard taskmaster. It is the hammer and the anvil, crushing individuality.” See also *ibid.*, 5, 31–2, and 36: “[W]estern culture... is based on the charismatic power of person.” Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 101: “Personality is at the heart of the West.”

¹⁰Examples of real-life sexual personae include Philadelphia prostitutes (Camille Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps: New Essays* [New York: Vintage, 1994], 59); Byron, Shelley, and Keats (*Sexual Personae*, 347); and Paglia herself (*Vamps & Tramps*, xxv).

¹¹Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 57, 423: “There is...nothing beautiful in nature. Nature is primal power, coarse and turbulent. Beauty is our weapon against nature; by it we make objects, giving them limits, symmetry, proportion. Beauty halts and freezes the melting flux of nature”; “Nature is a Decadent tree loaded with rotten fruit, a ‘ripe’ corpse bursting its skin and dribbling foul matter.”

¹²Ibid., 29, 32: “The most effective weapon against the flux of nature is art... Art, no matter how minimalist, is never simply design. It is always a ritualistic reordering of reality”; “Beauty...halts and condenses the flux and indeterminacy of nature.”

¹³Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 102: “I see the Western past as a story, episodic and cumulative. My reading of that story will show its symmetries, echoes, and internal development, its symbolization of thought and action in modes of personality I call personae.”

and dozens of masterworks to show how many connections may be found in the unlikeliest places. It's a very ambitious book.

It is also a defense of the unity and coherence of Western civilization (xiii). Paglia believes passionately in the value of general scholarship and inveighs against the "fragmentation" of Western culture effected by a joint effort of small-minded academic specialists and poststructuralists out to discredit Western civilization through their ideology.¹⁴

Criticism as Conceit

Sexual Personae thus combines criticism (abstracting sexual personae from great works)¹⁵ and theory (sex, nature, culture) toward the end of explaining the fundamental unity of Western civilization. The weak link is the criticism. Paglia describes her approach to criticism as "appreciation." She developed it early in her career, and initially *not* in reaction to feminism, postmodernism, or any of her more familiar nemeses, but to the New Criticism.¹⁶ An approach to studying the humanities, the New Criticism was at the peak of its influence during and after World War II. Its hallmark was careful textual analysis of poetry and literature, without the aid of details extrinsic to the work at hand, such as information about the author's life and times. Paglia found the New Criticism dowdy and uninspired in the "second generation" version she encountered as an undergraduate in the early 1960s.

Impatient with constantly being instructed about everything one *can't* use to bring to bear on texts, Paglia set out to liberate criticism by "supplementing" it—with her studies in psychology and history. What ultimately resulted was criticism as conceit: "My practice is to meet metaphor with metaphor, fire lighting fire to rekindle an art work smothered by overfamiliarity and received opinion."¹⁷ Shakespeare is compared and contrasted to Edmund Spenser, author of *The Faerie Queene*; Rousseau is contrasted with the Marquis de Sade; Lord Byron is compared to Elvis. The above-mentioned sexual personae are used to inform these comparisons and contrasts. In

¹⁴Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, xiii; *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 120, 126.

¹⁵The critical intention of *Sexual Personae* is stated most clearly in the work's original, canceled preface, which is republished in *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 101–24, esp. 113–24.

¹⁶See Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, ix, 114–24, 128–9, 201, 207–10, 278; and *Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Paglia Reads Forty-Three of the World's Best Poems* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), vii–viii.

¹⁷Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 117–19.

Sexual Personae's critical "odes [which]...analyze while still leaving the magic and the mystery,"¹⁸ the stranger the connection drawn, the better, because, in addition to attesting to the essential spontaneity of her criticism, connecting Emily Dickinson and Marquis de Sade supports Paglia's argument about the basic coherence of Western civilization.

It is useful to compare *Sexual Personae* with Cleanth Brooks's *Well Wrought Urn*, which Paglia refers to and is perhaps the most famous work of New Criticism.¹⁹ Reading both now, *Urn* feels much more unconstrained, more convincing as a case for high culture, and more refreshingly out of step with contemporary trends in the humanities. (It is easy to forget, because of the exuberant irrationality rampant across college campuses, that the sixties were the last time the liberal arts could be trusted to provide a decent education.) In our time, the audience for lyric poetry has almost completely disappeared,²⁰ but *Well Wrought Urn* shows how rewarding it is to read Donne, Keats, and others—and it does so without relying on any details about their own adventures or love affairs. To access them, all you need to do is take and read. Above all, Brooks is determined to explain how poetry works. To understand most fully why these works are masterpieces, it is necessary to understand them as poems. A reader misses *everything* when he attempts to reduce a poem to a simplistic "statement" such as "we should enjoy youth before youth fades."²¹

Though not as obviously ambitious as *Sexual Personae*, the *Well Wrought Urn* also lays a foundation for a defense of Western civilization, which must be able to explain not only why Homer's poems are great, but also the difference between a great poem and a great novel. *Sexual Personae* is not nearly as scrupulous with regard to form. Paglia's focus is character—all these artists were in the business of crafting sexual personae, regardless of their medium—and she approaches plays, novels, and lyric poems like works of sculpture and portrait paintings. *Sexual Personae* falls victim to a typical hazard of "interdisciplinary"²² efforts: the scholar approaches all works of art according to the strictures of his own discipline.

What's most frustrating about *Sexual Personae* is there's scant evidence of what T.S. Eliot described as "the first requisite of a critic": "interest in his

¹⁸Ibid., 115–16.

¹⁹Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947).

²⁰Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" *Commentary*, August 1988, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/who-killed-poetry/>.

²¹See Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, esp. chap. 11, "The Heresy of Paraphrase."

²²Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 120; *Sexual Personae*, xiii.

subject, and the ability to communicate an interest in it.”²³ *Sexual Personae* communicates an interest in Camille Paglia. It's impossible to deny the originality of her readings of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Henry James, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and various other works, but they too glibly assume a continuity between her concerns and those of the authors, none of whom, of course, actually speak of “sexual personae.” “Daemonic, “chthonic,” “apotropaion”—*Sexual Personae* relies heavily on its own terminology, with the result that it sometimes bears an uncomfortably close resemblance to the lingo-laden contemporary scholarship Paglia elsewhere denounces.²⁴

Paglia has been an academic misfit since graduate school. This is a source of pride for her. Though known best for confronting feminism and other fashionable ideologies, her main objection to modern academia is “economic.”²⁵ In her 1991 article “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf,” she likens the Foucault-dazzled modern humanities professoriate to Wall Street flimflam men and cheap car salesmen:²⁶

French theory, with its empty word-play, produces sophists, experts in getting ahead, getting worldly rewards. It allows a continuation not of Sixties leftism but of Fifties prep schools, with their snide, slick style, a cool, insufferably pretentious, nasal voice you can hear everywhere on Ivy League campuses. French theory is brand-name consumerism: Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault are the academic equivalents of BMW, Rolex, Cuisinart, the yuppie trophies.... French theory is like those how-to tapes guaranteed to make you a real-estate millionaire overnight. Gain power by attacking power! Make a killing! Be a master of the universe! Call this number in Paris *now!*²⁷

²³T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (1920; New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 91; 81: “[Swinburne’s] great merit as a critic is really one which, like many signal virtues, can be stated so simply as to appear flat. It is that he was sufficiently interested in his subject matter and knew quite enough about it; and this is a rare combination in English criticism.” “She has made people pay attention. She has made people care. She has made architecture matter in our culture in a way that it did not before her time.” Paul Goldberger, “Tribute to Ada Louise Huxtable,” March 25, 1996, Museum of the City of New York, <http://pg.robador.com/lectures/tribute-to-ada-louise-huxtable/>.

²⁴Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 49, 453: “[M]y theory is that [Henry] James’ Decadent late style is the heavy ritual transvestitism of a eunuch-priest of the mother goddess”; “Heathcliff is one of the great hermaphrodite sexual personae of Romanticism, a dream-representation of Emily Bronte as naturalized Byron.”

²⁵Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps*, xix, 120.

²⁶Camille Paglia, “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf,” a review of *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love*, by David M. Halperin, and *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece*, by John J. Winkler, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, third series, 1, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 139–212; reprinted in *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 170–248.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 220–21.

From her mentors Harold Bloom and Milton Kessler, under whom she studied as a graduate student at Yale and as an undergraduate at Harpur College at SUNY-Binghamton, respectively, Paglia developed an appreciation for a mastery of the Western canon.²⁸ Now, however, “theoretical sophistication” has supplanted mastery.²⁹ The postcolonial English literature scholar knows postcolonialist theory, not English literature. What makes academia that much more of a racket is how leftist scholars have claimed the mantle of sixties radicalism despite being none of them former radicals. Were these feminists and postcolonialists as antiestablishment as they claim, Paglia would welcome them, but they’re nothing more than bourgeois on the make. Disgusted by the academic establishment’s phoniness, Paglia remains at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia (Fall 2013 acceptance rate: 75 percent), where she began teaching as an aspiring academic in 1984, six years before the publication of *Sexual Personae* and her emergence as one of the nation’s leading public intellectuals.

Paglia can’t be accused of a lack of mastery, but *Sexual Personae*’s readings of art and literature are, without question, quite heavy on the theory. True, it’s her own theory, not some third-rate French import, but nonetheless an intrusive presence throughout *Sexual Personae*’s treatments of other works. At times, the criticism-as-conceit approach degenerates into self-caricature, casting severe doubt on the already questionable premise that the freewheeling use of metaphors counts as criticism.³⁰ The approach probably feels more spontaneous in the classroom, but as a seven hundred-page work of scholarship, *Sexual Personae* is tendentious and constrained. Each reading is kept on a short leash, as she’s always working her way back around to her main points about sexuality and modes of personality. This is the price of subordinating criticism to sexual theory.

At the same time, it’s not obvious how well the sexual theory is served by its forced marriage to criticism. The works most helpful in understanding Paglia’s thoughts on sexuality are her culture wars polemics, collected in *Sex, Art, and*

²⁸Paglia, “Milton Kessler: A Memoir,” *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 125–35.

²⁹Paglia, “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders,” 207.

³⁰Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 258:

Don Juan’s emotional and poetic style is replicated in a classic American experience: driving flat-out on a highway, radio blaring. Driving is the American sublime, for which there is no perfect parallel in Europe. Ten miles outside any American city, the frontier is wide open. Our long, straight superhighways crisscross vast space....To traverse or *skim* the American landscape in such a vehicle is to feel the speed and aerated space of *Don Juan*. Rock music pulsing on the radio is the car’s heartbeat. European radio stations are few and mostly state-controlled. But American radio-bands teem with music and voices, like the many moods of Byron’s poem. Driving through upstate New York, horizontally slashed by six hours of straight-as-the-crow-flies Thruway, one hears music from Illinois, Kentucky, North Carolina, as distant as Italy is from England. Twirling the radio dial while traveling the open road, the American driver flies along on a continuous surface of music, with a sublime sense of huge space surveyed and subsumed.

American Culture (1992) and *Vamps & Tramps* (1994).³¹ The sexual revolution created a target rich environment for Paglia's talents. Decades of reflection on sex differences and power made her perfectly positioned to discuss what's so compelling about pornography, why women stick with their abusers, how restrictive policies against date rape should be, and how AIDS rapidly became an epidemic. At the deepest level, Paglia believes that feminism's delusions are rooted in a "sunny Rousseauism running through the last two hundred years of liberal thinking,"³² leading most problematically to "a failure to deal with the issue of aggression."³³ Bringing a theory about human nature to bear on current social and cultural controversies is perhaps the best way to test its persuasiveness. Her success speaks for itself. Paglia owes her career as a public intellectual to her forcefully expressed views on sexuality, which won her a loyal following among many, not least conservatives, despite her being staunchly pro-abortion, pro-pornography, and pro-prostitution.

Criticism as Riffing

Sexual Personae was originally intended to be the first of a two-volume work, with part two applying the same interpretive framework to modern popular culture. It never appeared, but Paglia has published several standalone critical pieces on pop culture³⁴ and actively promoted pop culture in her many interviews and lectures. She once called for scholarships for rock musicians from foundations, corporations, federal and state agencies, and colleges and universities.³⁵ Perhaps more than any other work, a 1990 *New York Times* op-ed appreciation of Madonna made Paglia famous.³⁶

Why does Paglia—an erudite thinker with high standards—take lowbrow culture so seriously? For several reasons. The first is biographical. Paglia is a proud child of the sixties, whose spirit she embraced because of the possibilities for moral and cultural freedom it seemed to open up. When this freedom was not realized, it profoundly affected Paglia's intellectual development. Instead, the

³¹See especially, Paglia, "No Law in the Arena: A Pagan Theory of Sexuality," *Vamps & Tramps*, 19–94.

³²Ibid., 25.

³³Ibid., 38.

³⁴See for example, "The Female Lenny Bruce: Sandra Bernhard" and "Brooklyn Nefertiti: Barbara Streisand," *ibid.*, 137–40 and 141–5; and "Madonna II: Venus of the Radio Waves" and "Rock as Art," *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 6–13 and 19–21.

³⁵Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 20.

³⁶Camille Paglia, "Madonna—Finally, a Real Feminist," op-ed, *New York Times*, December 14, 1990, <http://nyti.ms/1Hsgox0>, reprinted in *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, 3–5.

children of the sixties reestablished a climate of conformism as stifling as that of the 1950s, a decade about which Paglia has almost nothing good to say. And by endowing every conceivable minority with victimhood status, left-wing intellectuals undermined personal liberty, a meaningless concept when divorced from responsibility. Furthermore, careerist mediocrities dismantled the Western canon,³⁷ leading to “the triumph of ideology over art.”³⁸ What remained was popular culture, “my passion.”³⁹ As Paglia sees it, the Rolling Stones and their like saved culture from the highbrows, even if the latter were too hidebound at the time to recognize it.⁴⁰ Promoting pop culture is one way to remain true to the spirit of the sixties and her youth.

Second, Paglia does not believe that a work of art is any less worthy for being commercial. She frequently goes out of her way to make clear her respect for capitalism (36–37), and has argued that advertising should be interpreted as American folk art.⁴¹ She admires Andy Warhol.⁴²

Third and most important, as in the case of her work on high culture, pop criticism allows Paglia to explicate her theory of sex and Western civilization. The influence of Paglia’s sexual theory on her criticism produces a bias for unity that effaces distinctions between high and low culture: Madonna and Shakespeare are equally interesting for what they reveal about sexuality. But conflating all forms of culture is the opposite of criticism; if critics are disinclined to help us distinguish among high, low, and middle, who will do so? At its best, literary criticism can make extraordinarily subtle distinctions, such as why *Hamlet* is inferior to *Antony and Cleopatra*.⁴³ Such distinctions in quality come with difficulty to sensibilities shaped by modern democracy, which views all hierarchy as illegitimate. Hence, the modern critic’s work is that much more difficult and important than in the past, when the concept of high versus low culture was acknowledged.

As has so often been the case with critics throughout history,⁴⁴ Paglia has brilliance to spare but erratic judgment. Her pop culture criticism is criticism as riffing: the most important ideas bear only an incidental relation to their ostensible

³⁷See Paglia, “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders.”

³⁸Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn*, ix.

³⁹Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, vii.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, viii–ix.

⁴¹Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn*, xi.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³T.S. Eliot, “Hamlet and His Problems” (1919), in *The Waste Land and Other Writings*, 137–43.

⁴⁴“[F]or every one really discerning critic there have always been fifty clever ones.” Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (1874; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 3.

subject matter. Riffing, whether intellectual or when done by a musician, can be spectacular, but its intention and virtue are opposite to those of criticism. When Coltrane or Brahms develop variations on a theme, the composition is of interest mainly for what the composer adds to the original. A work of negligible artistic merit such as a song by Madonna may be the *occasion* for insight, but not the source.

Moreover, Paglia's at first unconventional embrace of pop culture now seems conventional. Pop culture studies abound in modern humanities departments. With respect to the current crisis in the humanities, what's worse: that humanities departments indoctrinate students through classes ostensibly devoted to television shows, or that they offer classes on television shows in the first place?

Prior to the sixties, critical debate about pop culture was more discerning, because not everyone assumed that it was something serious minds had to acknowledge and more thought was given toward the subtle ways in which low and even middling culture undermined high culture.⁴⁵ Now, however, most critics seem to feel obligated to take pop culture seriously. Perhaps this stems from a fear that if they don't engage, they risk coming across as elitist or insecure. But engagement poses real risks, such as overthinking cultural confections made with no purpose beyond providing distraction and having less time to examine works of authentic depth and complexity. Accustomed to riffing on the Rolling Stones, the careless critic might begin to riff on Shakespeare, with results that may be brilliant but serve more to illuminate the critic than Shakespeare. Indeed, as Paglia writes: "Riffing and jamming on the classics, we can both corrupt and redeem them."⁴⁶

The Revenge of Cleanth Brooks

The best evidence of how Paglia's achievements as a critic have been limited by her theoretical preoccupations may be found in her two recent theory-free efforts, *Break, Blow, Burn* (2005) and *Glittering Images: A Journey through Art from Egypt to Star Wars* (2012). Among her works, these books come closest to pure criticism. Her ambition is to explain and promote the cause of poetry (*Break, Blow, Burn*) and art (*Glittering Images*), and to help her readers appreciate them. Each book is composed of a series of reprinted or photographed

⁴⁵Dwight MacDonal, "MassCult and MidCult," in *Masscult and Midcult: Essays against the American Grain* (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2011), 3–71.

⁴⁶Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps*, xiv.

poems and art works selected by Paglia, accompanied by a brief critical essay. Both are specifically addressed to a “general audience.”⁴⁷

In *Break, Blow, Burn*, Paglia blames the poets, in part, for the oft-noted obscurity of poetry in modern times: “Our most honored poets are gifted and prolific, but we have come to respect them for their intelligence, commitment, and the *body* of their work. They ceased focusing long ago on production of the powerful, distinctive, self-contained poem. They have lost ambition and no longer believe they can or should speak for their era. Elevating process over form, they treat their poems like meandering diary entries and craft them for effect in live readings.”⁴⁸ With art, in *Glittering Images*, she sees the neglect as more purely related to demand. Art can’t reach audiences because of sensory overstimulation by “all-pervasive mass media and slavishly monitored personal electronic devices,” a condition she describes as “vertigo.”⁴⁹ Americans have lost their basic ability to appreciate visual art, thanks to philistines on the right such as conservative talk radio hosts, whose anti-elitism Paglia finds otherwise refreshing, and ideologues on the left. Both poetry and art require deep reserves of patience from their audience. *Glittering Images* and *Break, Blow, Burn* mean to help us focus, in order to be better at seeing art and reading poetry, and because the ability to focus is valuable for its own sake.

The two books are strikingly tentative, modest even, for Paglia, a self-confessed lifelong “showboat.”⁵⁰ She keeps the accompanying essays short to maintain the focus on the works. Significantly, Paglia tips her hat to the New Criticism in the preface to *Break, Blow, Burn*.⁵¹ There, and in *Glittering Images*, she emphasizes the *how* of poetry and visual art, the craftsmanship behind each work that allows it to stand on its own. The most important quality that these two books share with *Sexual Personae* is their advocacy of general knowledge. *Glittering Images* and *Break, Blow, Burn* can be thought of as valuable, high quality Art History and Poetry 101 textbooks. (The revival of the traditional art history survey class is one of Paglia’s missions.)

Of the two, *Glittering Images* is less successful, because its criticism relies too heavily on contextual details, such as about the artists’ lives. Though less distracting than the psychological context Paglia imports throughout the readings

⁴⁷Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn*, vii; *Glittering Images: A Journey through Art from Egypt to Star Wars* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), *Glittering Images*, xiv.

⁴⁸Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn*, xii.

⁴⁹Paglia, *Glittering Images*, vii.

⁵⁰Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps*, 429.

⁵¹Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn*, vii–viii.

in *Sexual Personae*, these details water down *Glittering Images* and make it less remarkable. It would have been a much stronger book had Paglia packed in more insights such as these:

The most unforgettable aspect of the image of Saint John [Chrysostom, in the Hagia Sophia] is its implacable intensity of gaze.

The vibrating letter [on the *Book of Kells* "Chi-Rho" page] has an eager, supercharged energy that threatens to spin it into space.

There is no promise of redemption or rebirth in this brutal, frigid landscape [Caspar David Friederich's *The Sea of Ice*], where nature grinds the organic down into basic elements.

[T]ension is felt from the unnaturally compressed space [of Magritte's *The Portrait*].

[D]espite their sharp lines, Mondrian's geometries are never rigid or oppressive. His paintings have a serene, contemplative stillness.⁵²

These passages are truly helpful in teaching the reader/student how to see art.

The conclusion of *Glittering Images*, where Paglia argues for George Lucas as "an epic filmmaker who turned dazzling new technology into an expressive personal genre," cannot pass without mention.⁵³ This chapter on a filmmaker departs from the book's generally improved sensitivity toward form. If Lucas is such a genius with visual art, why does he labor in a medium that carries expectations of plot, dialogue, and character? Paglia sets aside this line of criticism by saying that Lucas simply chooses to make these elements "de-emphasized."⁵⁴ But most people will need more than nine pages to be convinced that the man ultimately responsible for "Hold me, like you did by the lake on Naboo," is "the world's greatest living artist."⁵⁵ It does not seem consistent of Paglia to celebrate both dialogue-intense screwball comedies such as *His Girl Friday* and *The Philadelphia Story*, and Lucas, because two more different models of what film should do are hard to find.

⁵²Paglia, *Glittering Images*, 37, 41, 88, 124, 131.

⁵³Ibid., 181.

⁵⁴Ibid., 186.

⁵⁵Ibid., xvi.

Conclusion

Sexual Personae, like Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*, which appeared two years later, makes sweeping generalizations in order to explain all of human history in a single volume. Such books do much to advance public debate, surely far more than the earnest pleas commonly heard for more bipartisanship or objectivity. They are also necessary to combatting entrenched and harmful ideologies. To engage feminism or postmodernism while shying away from generalizations of one's own would be to bring a knife to a gunfight.

Sexual Personae also paved the way for *Break, Blow, Burn* and *Glittering Images*. Though both were well-received by critics and sold well, their success no doubt owed much to the strength of Paglia's existing reputation. That she used her perch to promote criticism speaks highly of her commitment to raising cultural standards. Hopefully, she'll continue to do more of the same, and *Break, Blow, Burn* and *Glittering Images* will someday be seen as transitional works in her corpus. Criticism may not be as spectacular as theory, but, by educating the aesthetic sensibility and providing an entry into the perspectives of past masters, it enhances the quality of debate and our cultural life more generally. Paglia's talents, erudition, and reputation make her uniquely well-positioned to contribute to a revival of criticism in our time. But she'll need to back off from the theorizing. It's hard for the same mind to be both hedgehog and fox.