

# I Am the Cosmos



**Get this woman  
a Valium, hand  
her a gin.  
Camille, honey,  
calm down!**

**A**USTIN, TEXAS—"SO WRITE ABOUT CAMILLE Paglia," suggested the editor. Like any normal person, I replied, "And who the hell might she be?"

Big cheese in New York intellectual circles. The latest rage. Hot stuff. Controversial.

But I'm not good on New York intellectual controversies, I explained. Could never bring myself to give a rat's ass about Jerzy Kosinski. Never read Andy Warhol's diaries. Can never remember the name of the editor of this *New Whatsit*, the neo-con critical rag. I'm a no-hoper on this stuff, practically a professional provincial.

Read Paglia, says he, you'll have an opinion. So I did; and I do.

Christ! Get this woman a Valium!

Hand her a gin. Try meditation. Camille, honey, calm down!

The noise is about her *oeuvre*, as we always say in Lubbock: *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. In very brief, for those of you who have been playing hooky from the *New York Review of Books*, Ms. Paglia's contention is that "the history of western civilization has been a constant struggle between . . . two impulses, an unending tennis match between cold, Apollonian categorization and Dionysian lust and chaos." Jeez, me too. I always thought the world was divided into only two kinds of people—those who think the world is divided into only two kinds of people, and those who don't.

You think perhaps this is a cheap shot, that I have

searched her work and caught Ms. Paglia in a rare moment of sweeping generalization, easy to make fun of? *Au contraire*, as we always say in Amarillo; the sweeping generalization is her signature. In fact, her work consists of damn little else. She is the queen of the categorical statement.

Never one to dodge a simple dichotomy when she can set one up, Ms. Paglia holds that the entire error of western civilization stems from denying that nature is a kind of nasty, funky, violent, wet dream, and that Judeo-Christianity has been one long effort to ignore this. She pegs poor old Rousseau, that fathead, as the initiator of the silly notion that Nature is benign and glorious and that only civilization corrupts.

Right away, I got a problem. Happens I have spent a lot of my life in the wilderness, and also a lot of my life in bars. When I want sex and violence, I go to a Texas honky-tonk. When I want peace and quiet, I head for the woods. Just as a minor historical correction to Ms. Paglia, Rousseau did not invent the concept of benign Nature. Among the first writers to hold that nature was a more salubrious environment for man than the corruptions of civilization were the Roman Stoics—rather a clear-eyed lot, I always thought.

Now why, you naturally ask, would anyone care about whether a reviewer has ever done any serious camping? Ah, but you do not yet know the Camille Paglia school of I-am-the-cosmos argument. Ms. Paglia believes that all her personal experiences are Seminal. Indeed, Definitive. She credits a large part of her sup-

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posed wisdom to having been born post-World War II and thus having been raised on television. Damn me, so was I.

In addition to the intrinsic cultural superiority Ms. Paglia attributes to herself from having grown up watching television ("It's Howdy-Doody Time" obviously made us all smarter), she also considers her own taste in music to be of enormous significance. "From the moment the feminist movement was born, it descended into dogma," she told an interviewer for *New York* magazine. "They stifled any kind of debate, any kind of dissent. Okay, it's Yale, it's New Haven in '69, I am a rock fanatic, okay. . . . So I was talking about taste to these female rock musicians, and I said the Rolling Stones were the greatest rock band, and that just set them off. They said, 'The Rolling Stones are sexist, and it's bad music because it's sexist.' I said: 'Wait a minute. You can't make judgments about art on the basis of whether it fits into some dogma.' And now they're yelling, screaming, saying that nothing that deems women can be art."

"You see, right from the start it was impossible for me to be taken into the feminist movement, okay? The only art they will permit is art that gives a positive image of women. I said, 'That's like the Soviet Union; that is the demagogic, propagandistic view of art.'"

Well, by George, as a First Amendment absolutist, you'll find me willing to spring to the defense of Camille Paglia's right to be a feminist Rolling Stones fan any hour, day or night. Come to think of it, who the hell was the Stalin who wouldn't let her do that? I went back and researched the '69 politburo, and all I could find was Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, and Gloria Steinem, none of whom ever seems to have come out against rock music.

I have myself quite cheerfully been both a country-music fan and a feminist for years—if Camille Paglia is the cosmos, so am I. When some fellow feminist doesn't like my music (How could you not like "You are just another sticky wheel on the grocery cart of life"?), I have always felt free to say, in my politically correct feminist fashion, "Fuck off."

In a conversation printed in *Harper's* magazine, Paglia held forth on one of her favorite themes—Madonna, the pop singer: "The latest atavistic discoverer of the pagan heart of Catholicism is Madonna. This is what she's up to. She doesn't completely understand it herself. When she goes on *Nightline* and makes speeches about celebrating the body, as if she's some sort of Woodstock hippie, she's way off. She needs *me* to tell her." I doubt that.

Bram Dijkstra, author of a much-praised

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book, *Idols of Perversity*, which is a sort of mirror image of *Sexual Personae*, said that Paglia "literally drags the whole nineteenth-century ideological structure back into the late-eighteenth century, really completely unchanged. What's so amazing is that she takes all that nineteenth-century stuff, Darwinism and social Darwinism, and she reasserts it and reaffirms it in this incredibly dualistic fashion. In any situation, she establishes the lowest common denominator of a point. She says, 'This is the feminist point of view,' and overturns it by standing it on its head. She doesn't go outside what she critiques; she simply puts out the opposite of it."

"For example," Dijkstra continues, "she claims, 'Feminism blames rape on pornography,' which is truly the *reductio ad absurdum* of the feminist point of view. Of course there are very many feminist points of view, but then she blows away this extremely simplified opposite, and we are supposed to consider this erudition. She writes aphorisms and then throws them out, one after the other, so rapid-fire the reader is exhausted."

Tracing Paglia's intellectual ancestry is a telling exercise; she's the lineal descendant of Ayn Rand, who in turn was a student of William Graham Sumner, one of the early American sociologists and an enormously successful popularizer of social Darwinism. Sumner was in turn a disciple of Herbert Spencer, that splendid nineteenth-century kook. Because Paglia reasserts ideas so ingrained in our thinking, she has become popular by reaffirming common prejudices.

Paglia's obsession with de Sade is beyond my competence, although the glorification of sadomasochism can easily be read as a rationalization of bondage into imagined power, a characteristic process of masochistic transfer. Dijkstra suggests that the Sadean notion of the executioner's assistant is critical to her thinking, though one wonders if there is not also some identification with de Sade the Catholic aristocrat.

Paglia's view of sex—that it is irrational, violent, immoral, and wounding—is so glum that one hesitates to suggest that it might be

instead, well, a lot of fun, and maybe even affectionate and loving.

Far less forgivable is Paglia's consistent confusion of feminism with yuppies. What *does* she think she's doing? Paglia holds feminists responsible for the bizarre blight created by John T. Molloy, author of *Dress for Success*, which caused a blessedly brief crop of young women, all apparently aspiring to be executive vice-presidents, to appear in the corporate halls wearing those awful sand-colored baggy suits with little floppy bow ties around their necks.

Why Paglia lays the blame for this at the feet of feminism is beyond me. Whatever our other aims may have been, no one in the feminist movement ever thought you are what you wear. The only coherent fashion statement I can recall from the entire movement was the suggestion that Mrs. Cleaver, Beaver's mom, would on the whole have been a happier woman had she not persisted in vacuuming while wearing high heels. This, I still believe.

In an even more hilarious leap, Paglia contends that feminism is responsible for the aerobics craze and concern over thin thighs. Speaking as a beer-drinking feminist whose idea of watching her diet is to choose either the baked potato with sour cream or with butter, but not with both, I find this loony beyond all hope—and I am the cosmos, too.

What we have here, fellow citizens, is a crassly egocentric, raving twit. The Norman Podhoretz of our gender. That this woman is actually taken seriously as a thinker in New York intellectual circles is a clear sign of decadence, decay, and hopeless pinheadedness. Has no one in the nation's intellectual capital the background and ability to see through a web of categorical assertions? One fashionable line of response to Paglia is to claim that even though she may be fundamentally off-base, she has "flashes of brilliance." If so, I missed them in her oceans of swill.

One of her latest efforts at playing enfant terrible in intellectual circles was a peppy essay for *Newsday*, claiming that either there is no such thing as date rape or, if there is, it's women's fault because we dress so provocatively. Thanks, Camille, I've got some Texas fraternity boys I want you to meet.

There is one area in which I think Paglia and I would agree that politically correct feminism has produced a noticeable inequity. Nowadays, when a woman behaves in a hysterical and disagreeable fashion, we say, "Poor dear, it's probably PMS." Whereas, if a man behaves in a hysterical and disagreeable fashion, we say, "What an asshole." Let me leap to correct this unfairness by saying of Paglia, Sheesh, what an asshole. □

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