

Higher Education, Gender and Freedom of Expression - Interview with Camille Paglia¹

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Photo: Michael Lionstar



On April 9, 2019, renowned cultural critic and social analyst Camille Paglia, author of eight books - some iconic in many countries, such as *Sexual Personae* - was giving a public lecture called *Ambiguous Images: Sexual Duality and Sexual*

Multiplicity in Western Art at the University of Arts in Philadelphia. Before the lecture, there had been a demonstration in a hallway by students who were protesting remarks, spread by social media, that had been made by Camille in interviews several years ago about sexual assault as well as transgenderism. Forty minutes into the lecture, a protestor pulled a fire alarm in the hallway, causing the cancellation of the lecture, as all 17 floors of the university building had to be evacuated onto the city streets.

The next day, David Yager, president of the University of the Arts, published via campus email a strong statement defending free speech: "Limiting the range of voices in society erodes our democracy. Universities, moreover, are at the heart of the revolutionary notion of free expression: promoting the free exchange of ideas is part of the core reason for their existence." He emphatically concludes: "Not now, not at UArts!" The activists, rejecting the president's statement as "ignorant", then created an online petition demanding Camille's dismissal from the university where she has been teaching since 1984 and her replacement by a "queer person of color".

The president's response could be considered obvious: a defense of a senior faculty member (whose academic work has had international influence), the autonomy to decide curriculum and freedom of expression. But the truth is that his affirmation of free speech had a powerful impact nationwide because the US has been repeatedly shaken by episodes whose outcome has often been the opposite.

As at Yale University in November 2015, when for two hours a group of students surrounded the respected sociologist Nicholas Christakis, the Master of Silliman College, with screams and outbursts of crying. The fury was sparked because his wife, a child psychologist, suggested in an email that undergraduates could choose their Halloween costumes without the approval of the "office of diversity" - as if in Brazil we needed a department to regulate the carnival. Some shouted at Christakis, "It does not matter whether you agree or not. It is not a debate!" One girl yells, "You are disgusting!" The video images are disturbing, for one sees Christakis believing in the force of dialogue, surrounded by childlike and desperate students, the perfect picture of what is called the "snowflake generation" - an ultrasensitive crowd who burst into tears in the face of any frustration. No student was rebuked for insubordination, and Yale

even awarded prizes to some, after Yale president Peter Salovey thanked those who invaded the front lawn of his home at night, embracing the idea that he had something to learn from them. Faced with adult capitulation, the harassment and intimidation of the Christakis continued for months. The couple finally resigned and left the Master's residence, although Christakis continued his position on the Yale faculty. His wife would no longer teach at Yale. In 2018 - three years after the incident in the courtyard at Silliman College - Christakis was awarded a Sterling Professorship, which is the highest honor that Yale gives to professors, indicating the misconception of Yale's previous position.

In May 2017, a group of students invaded the biology class of popular professor Bret Weinstein, a long-time progressive Leftist at Evergreen State College, and called him a "racist" because he refused to accept the edict of the director of multicultural orientation for all white faculty to cancel their courses for one day and remain off campus in a "Day of Absence", a form of empathy for non-whites. Weinstein called the banishing of whites from campus an "act of oppression in and of itself", because of its targeting of skin color. Weinstein and his biologist wife, Heather Heying, eventually resigned from Evergreen, after filing a law suit alleging that the college "failed to protect its employees from repeated provocative and corrosive verbal and written hostility based on race, as well as threats of physical violence."

Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson has also had master classes and lectures interrupted, such as in March 2017 at McMaster University, and a year later at Queen's University. By disagreeing with certain politically correct exaggerations and state intervention in how people can speak or write, Peterson has been accused of "transphobia". Recently, in a nebulous episode, the University of Cambridge canceled its offer of a Visiting Fellowship to Peterson, without giving a reason.

In May 2019, Harvard College dismissed African-American Harvard Law School professor Ronald Sullivan and his wife Stephanie Robinson from their decade-long positions as resident co-deans at the undergraduate Winthrop House because Sullivan decided to join the defense team of controversial film producer Harvey Weinstein, accused of multiple charges of rape and sexual harassment and the pivot of the #MeToo

scandal. Although Weinstein has not even been tried and the right to a lawyer and defense is a constitutional guarantee for every defendant, the students argued that they did not feel "safe" at Winthrop House with Sullivan, the director of the Criminal Justice Institute at Harvard Law who, incidentally, had already represented unpopular clients in the past, such as serial murderers and even accused terrorists, without ever provoking a sense of insecurity among students. But Harvard capitulated, opening a dangerous precedent that puts the presumption of innocence in the background, making the lawyer guilty just for defending an unpopular defendant.

In the interview that follows, I talked to Camille Paglia about the episode that involved her recently at UArts, as well as the context of other campus incidents in North America.

What exactly was your lecture about, and what subjects could you not address because of the interruption? The Sunday Times of London said that you were about to talk about Mick Jagger and David Bowie.

Last Fall, I had been asked by the director of the School of Critical Studies (where my courses are listed) to give a public talk in its new lecture series. So I chose the subject of gender, because my course *Gender Images in Media*, which I taught for the 29th time this past Spring, was the first course about gender ever offered by the University of the Arts. It began in 1986 as *Women and Sex Roles*, two years after I arrived to teach here. In that first semester, I initiated a student discussion of the new feminist theme of sexual harassment. My class developed moderate guidelines appropriate for an arts college, and I presented the completed proposal to the administration. It was the first time sexual harassment had been raised as a public issue on this campus.

My April 9 lecture, *Ambiguous Images: Sexual Duality and Sexual Multiplicity in Western Art*, was a commentary on a series of 50 sexually ambiguous or gender-related images drawn from the entire history of art, starting with the Stone Age and moving chronologically through ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Roman era all the way down to modern popular culture. Among the pop images were Marlene Dietrich in her male tuxedo and top hat in *Morocco*; Katharine Hepburn in her flowing

pantsuits and denim trousers; Andy Warhol's drag and trans Superstars, Jackie Curtis and Candy Darling; Mick Jagger and David Bowie in their gender-bending "mandresses" by Michael Fish; Jim Morrison's epochal photo shoot as a long-haired, bare-chested Antinous; and six spectacular photos of Grace Jones in dazzlingly different sexual personae, from femme to butch.

The images ended with a movie poster of Raquel Welch as Gore Vidal's transsexual Myra Breckinridge in the film based on his 1968 blockbuster bestselling novel (which sold over two million copies in a month). *Myra Breckinridge* was just re-released in May after being out of print in the U.S. for over 30 years. The publisher asked me to write the Introduction (2019). In 1991, Vidal told *New York* magazine for its cover story on me (*Woman Warrior*) that my first book, *Sexual Personae* (1990), "sounds like Myra Breckinridge on a roll. I have no higher praise" (STANFILL, 1991). Vidal was absolutely correct: the voice of *Sexual Personae* is a transsexual construction, expressing my lifelong alienation from the gender system. After its publication, I called *Sexual Personae* (718 pages long) "the biggest sex change in history".

Hence the absurdity of a transgender protest against a professor and author who describes herself as transgender - and who was the only openly gay person (student or faculty) at the Yale Graduate School during the years that I was there (1968-72). Everyone else was safely in the closet. My doctoral dissertation, *Sexual Personae: Categories of the Androgyne*, was the only dissertation on sex in the entire graduate school - at a time when the subject of sex was not taken seriously and was highly professionally risky.

There is no pope and no official doctrine in either feminism or transgenderism. Any feminist or transgender person is completely free to take any position whatever on any issue. No individual or group of individuals has the right to enforce conformity on controversial subjects, especially when a movement is still in its early phases. To assume that feminist or transgender ideology is already frozen in place and that any deviation from it is heresy is a profound stupidity. Progressive contemporary thought must always be in free flow - and especially in the realm of gender, about whose fluidity I have been writing for over half a century.

My lecture was terminated abruptly while we were still in antiquity: my image of the strangely mummiform cult statue of Diana of Ephesus had just come up on the screen. Preceding it were two gorgeous sculptures of the emperor Hadrian's lover, Antinous, as well as the playfully ambiguous *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* in the Louvre. It was quite obvious that the protestors (giggling and chattering like restless school children in the upper rows) were disappointed that my lecture was actually pro-transgender and that there was nothing whatever to boo about. Rather than admit to themselves that they had been grossly misinformed about me and my work, a co-conspirator pulled the fire alarm in the hallway outside - a testament to the protestors' narcissistic desperation to play rebel. This crude intervention was an illegal act that put hundreds of student occupants of that 17-floor classroom building in danger, as everyone was forced to exit rapidly down the narrow steps into the busy city streets until the fire trucks arrived. Only when the fire marshals had inspected every floor were people allowed to re-enter the building to return to their classes or art studios (I myself had been safely escorted by campus security officers to the backstage dressing room of the lecture hall, where for an hour I witnessed top officials of the university heroically coping with that emergency threat to public safety).

This outrageous episode, which deprived other tuition-paying students of their right to acquire broad historical knowledge, was an attack on the entire Western tradition of universities and academic process. When the fire alarm went off, the protestors in the upper rows stood up and screamed their joy like maniacs, pointing and cursing at me at the podium. Their behavior was excessive and abnormal by any psychological standard. As the hall degenerated into chaos, what flashed into my mind was a brutal scene in the 1977 film, *Julia* (starring Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave), where a horde of laughing young Nazis attack and rampage through a medical school in Vienna. Whatever point the protestors thought they were making at my lecture was undermined by their uncivilized behavior and actions. By showing indifference and disrespect to the public display of classic artifacts (like the exquisite *Hermes* of Praxiteles or the majestic green-diorite statue of the enthroned pharaoh Chephren from Gizeh), they aligned themselves with the forces of barbarism. And their primitive resort to mob rule

was a political fiasco insofar as it has (via national media coverage) already undermined the Left and will inevitably strengthen conservative opposition during next year's presidential election in the U.S.

Just three days before my lecture, former president Barack Obama gave a speech in Berlin where he expressed "worry" about "a certain kind of rigidity" among progressives in the U.S.: "We start sometimes creating what's called a circular firing squad, where you start shooting at your allies because one of them is straying from purity on the issues." This is exactly what happened in the incident at my university: by their self-indulgent extremism and callous disregard for the rights of others, including their own peers, the protestors did deep damage to themselves and their own progressive cause.

You have declared yourself transgender. Why have you been accused of being transphobic?

First of all, transphobia, like homophobia, is a psychological condition. This clinical term has been wrongly appropriated and distorted by political ideologues, who have injected it with a crusading moralism. A phobia is a compulsive, all-consuming fear or obsession, sometimes produced by an unconscious attraction to the very thing that is feared. Merely expressing a rational critique of transgender or gay activism does not make anyone transphobic or homophobic.

Yes, I have been publicly critical in interviews over the past several years of several tenets of current transgender activism, and I strongly encourage other gay and transgender dissidents to also speak out. Silence about these urgent issues helps no one but the far Right, toward whom mainstream voters are driven when the Left becomes so consumed by its own ideology that it claims repressive and dictatorial powers over both private and public life.

First of all, I categorically oppose the use of puberty blockers on children, which I consider a violation of human rights. Children are not equipped to make an informed choice about medical matters and must rely on the wisdom and prudence of adults. The long-term effects of puberty blockers are uncharted and unknown. Why would any

ethical society perform medical experiments on children? I predict that the future will look back at this moment with incredulity.

I identify strongly with this issue because I myself have lived with a massive gender dysphoria since early childhood - as far back as I can remember. It is indeed the primary source of my unique perspective and the principal motivation of my work. I have always contemplated human life from the outside, like a visitor from an alien galaxy. Over the decades, I have repeatedly described my lavish male Halloween costumes, which were unheard of for a small girl in the conservative and conformist U.S. of the 1950s: Robin Hood (from a comic book); the toreador from *Carmen* (from an opera book); a Roman soldier (modeled on the tormentors of Jesus in the Stations of the Cross); Napoleon Bonaparte (from a brandy advertisement in *Time* magazine); and Hamlet (from a Classics Illustrated comic book). A photo of me at age 8 in full costume as Napoleon appears in my most recent book, *Provocations* (2018: 578).

Identifying as a lesbian in adolescence seemed to offer a solution to my social maladjustment, but I was never a particularly good or successful lesbian. Among other things, lesbians have rarely liked or approved of me - I think it is probably because I remind them too much of a rough, loud teenaged boy! I have often thought that things would be much simpler had I simply been a gay man, given how often I encounter deeply shared interests in art, beauty, and classic Hollywood movies with witty, highly cultured gay men all over the world.

I say all this to stress how deeply and personally I take the issue of puberty blockers, because there is no doubt whatsoever that I was obviously a prime candidate for that medical intervention from my earliest years. I had zero identification with anything conventionally female - starting with dolls, which were constantly given to me as a girl but which I detested with a passion. I wanted swords! (I bought my first real sword in a rural junk shop when I was 12.) Had I ever heard the slightest rumor that sex change operations existed, I would have become obsessed with the idea that I was really a boy and that surgery could recover and restore my true self. Indeed, I think I would have remained vulnerable to this *idée fixe* until my mid-20s, when I was already teaching at my first job at Bennington College.

What banished the allure of that physical transformation was my achieving and externalizing my true self in another form: the gargantuan manuscript of *Sexual Personae* (originally over 1700 pages long), into which I projected all my reflections about and dissatisfactions with gender. In that book, I maintain that our true oppressor is not society but nature, which in its fascist ecology has imposed biological gender upon us at birth. Sex change is literally impossible: every cell of our bodies, except for the blood, remains coded with our birth gender for life. However, I ally with the great dissident tradition of the Marquis de Sade, Baudelaire, and Oscar Wilde, who demand and celebrate *defiance* of nature - like Melville's Captain Ahab shaking his fist at the stormy sky. Against nature: that is the argument of my book, and it remains my definition of art.

Hence I am highly concerned about the rush of so many gender-questioning young people toward hormones and surgery. Why is it necessary to solidify and literalize one's mercurial, ever-evolving identity in the frail envelope of the flesh? - which all the major world religions have rightly described as an illusion destined to decay and vanish. No one is completely satisfied with his or her body, which will inevitably betray us anyhow as we slide toward death. Why this eagerness among young people for lifelong servitude to the rapacious pharmaceutical industry? Why make irreversible changes in the body when there is nothing about the body that actually expresses our deepest, truest identity?

Young people of my insurgent 1960s generation liberated sexuality from censorship and institutional control, but more importantly, they sought an expansion and refinement of consciousness. In *Provocations* (2018), my message to gender-questioning young people is: "Stay fluid! Stay free!". Freedom is my ultimate value. The Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus said, "All things flow." A true revolution in gender begins in the mind.

Imagination is far greater than the body. One of my favorite moments in film occurs in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), where a disillusioned photographer (David Hemmings) encounters a glamorous model (Veruschka) at a drug-filled party in London. "I thought you were going to Paris," he says. She replies, "I am in Paris."

How do you feel about calling and referring to students as they prefer?

Among the grotesque lies that were circulated about me on social media by unscrupulous transgender activists in the month before my public lecture was that I refused to use a student's preferred pronouns in the classroom and that I insulted that person in front of other students by declaring that the only pronoun I would ever use would be "it" - as if the student were sub-human.

This hallucinatory fabrication exposes the shameless amorality of too many political activists today, who are so addicted to their messianic self-image that they will use any tool, including character assassination, to destroy their opponents. These rabid ideologues are the enemies of democracy.

The issue of transgender pronouns has never once occurred in any of my classes and certainly not in my canonical *Gender Images in Media* course, which is conducted as a large lecture class consisting of purely historical and cultural material. My longtime position on this issue is that using an individual's preferred pronouns is a matter of basic human courtesy. Not to do so would be gratuitously rude and certainly unacceptable in a campus classroom situation with other students present.

However, I strongly oppose all intrusion by government into control of language, unless that language involves physical threat or public danger. My position is exactly like that of the major Canadian intellectual Jordan Peterson, who stresses the freedom of the individual throughout his work. Peterson too has publicly declared that he would of course use preferred pronouns as a simple courtesy, but he and I agree that government has no right whatsoever to monitor language or to compel compliance. Surrendering our autonomy to the punitive surveillance of a bloated bureaucracy invites and eventually produces totalitarianism.

My principles of gender belong to my more general libertarian philosophy: I maintain that every individual possesses total rights over his or her identity as well as his or her body, which can be altered or modified at will. I strongly support the creation of an "X" category on passports and ID cards: in my view, the government has no authority or need even to inquire about gender, which should remain completely within the domain of personal choice.

The individual's fundamental right to his or her body also extends to abortion. While I accept that the developing fetus is indeed a person (as maintained by religious traditionalists), I deny nevertheless that the state has any right to intervene in a woman's choices about the internal operations of her own body, which were formed by nature and by nature alone. Thus in my view, both academic feminism and current transgenderism have erred in erasing biology from their theoretical system. Nature is greater than society and is the ultimate source of our power as living beings. A woman terminating her own pregnancy is acting as proxy for pitiless nature itself, whose master plan over many millennia has littered the earth with its blood sacrifices.

Also intrinsic to my libertarian philosophy is my demand that the state must treat all individuals in exactly the same way. That is true equality before the law. There should be no special protections for any group - no condescending protraction of historic "victim" status. Hence I oppose the widespread categories of "hate speech" and "hate crimes", which I regard as totally reactionary. We should never permit the state to inquire into the thinking or motivation of any citizen (except at the sentencing stage of a trial, *after* conviction for a crime). Both thought and language must be vigilantly protected from state intrusion.

I have been voicing my objections to "hate speech" and "hate crimes" legislation for decades, and my dark prophecy about the disorder that they would unleash has been abundantly confirmed. Western society has been steadily consumed by political correctness, which has spread via bloated and parasitic bureaucracies into every area of life and now threatens the great university tradition itself, whose roots were in medieval scholarship, both Christian and Muslim.

You have also been critical of the #MeToo movement. In an interview (2018b: 206-8), you commented on how that movement was damaged by the organized defense by Judith Butler of her friend Avital Ronell, a woman professor accused by a male graduate student of sexual harassment (New York University later suspended Ronell for a year without pay). To what extent did your criticisms of #MeToo resonate with UArts protestors?

The manipulative intervention of Judith Butler in the Avital Ronell case surprised and dismayed many of her admirers, who had not realized the extent to which Butler is a product and symbol of the international academic elite. Butler has never defied the academic system but smoothly adapted herself to it, from the moment she transferred as an undergraduate in the 1970s from Bennington College (where I was then teaching during my most inflammatory and confrontational Amazon feminist phase) to Yale University, where post-structuralism was the hot new opportunity for ambitious young careerists. Butler never took my courses at Bennington (a very small school in rural Vermont), but I knew her and her social circle and hence am well aware of her trajectory.

In regard to the UArts protestors, yes, some of them (judging by the hallway signs that I later saw in news photos) seemed to have been focused on sexual assault issues. But it was obvious that the protestors had never read or even seen my books and that they had been whipped up by scattered excerpts from past interviews circulated on social media. They were certainly totally unaware that I had been the first to introduce sexual harassment guidelines at the University of the Arts in 1986 - which shows how little they had researched any of this.

I have actually said very little publicly about #MeToo, except for an article early last year in *The Hollywood Reporter* (2018c). I warned there: "The big question is whether the present wave of revelations, often consisting of unsubstantiated allegations from decades ago, will aid women's ambitions in the long run or whether it is already creating further problems by reviving ancient stereotypes of women as hysterical, volatile and vindictive."

A preliminary answer has already come from Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, who told CBS News in May (MORE, 2019) that in the business world, male managers are now limiting and diminishing their professional interactions with women, who are therefore losing crucial opportunities for mentoring and even for one-on-one meetings with their male bosses. Sandberg said there has been a huge increase in just one year (from 32% to 60%) in the number of male managers who admit that they are now "afraid" to meet privately with women. This is not good news for women, but it was totally predictable. Behaving like howling Furies or implacable

bloodhounds does not help the advancement of women toward professional and political power.

From the very first opinion piece that I wrote about the campus date-rape controversy in *New York Newsday* in 1991 (2017: 52-57), I have strongly opposed the involvement of university administrations in any aspect of the sex lives of students. If an assault or rape occurs, it should be promptly reported to the police. College committees are not professionally trained or competent to serve as crime investigators or judicial tribunals. Furthermore, unless concrete, objective evidence exists, filing a complaint about a sexual incident months or years after the event is incompatible with modern democracy or even simple justice.

The now universal intrusion of campus administrative offices into the private social lives of students is an appalling return to the strict rules *in loco parentis* ("in place of the parent") against which my generation of college women rebelled during the 1960s. For our safety and protection, we were outrageously locked in our dormitories at 11:00 PM, while the men students could run free all night long. Infuriated by this double standard, we won personal and sexual freedom for future women students - but evidently many young women today do not want it. Like orphans in the novels of Charles Dickens, they long for paternalistic protections and maternal soothing. Like genteel Victorian maidens, they feel incapable of expressing or defending themselves at work or play without the authoritarian support of punitive overseers.

My code of Amazon feminism is based on personal empowerment: every woman is responsible for her own life. Working-class women have painfully few options and are vulnerable to abuse, but there is no excuse whatever for well-educated upper-middle-class professional women to claim powerlessness at work. They must speak up strongly and immediately to defend their own dignity and self-respect, which are spiritual principles far more important than any material career advantage. No one is accepting or making excuses for criminal behavior. But human existence is fraught with dangers - for men too. Sexuality is an unstable and primitive force rooted in animal instinct. There are psychotics roaming the world whom everyone must fear. No set of rules adopted by a campus or workplace will ever eliminate the risks that we all incur merely by being

alive. The safe, sanitized, rigidly regulated utopia demanded by too many feminists is a bourgeois fantasy that is preventing young women from seeing life as it is. A feminism predicated on victimization and martyrdom is a disaster for modern women.

What role did social media play in mobilizing these students to the event? Facebook has been used to spread defamatory messages and claims by both Leftist and extreme Right-wing groups in the United States as well as Brazil. At the same time, the social media administrators are applying censorship strategies. I myself had a post blocked because it merely contained a link to a news article in *O Globo* about an exhibition of the works of photographer Otto Stupakoff at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I have also seen blocks of posts that linked to an essay of yours in *The Hollywood Reporter* (2018d) because it contained sexy photos of Rihanna and Kim Kardashian.

Social media were the entire origin and impetus for this incident at my university. Two months before my lecture, a former student contacted me to say that several transgender activists in Philadelphia were targeting UArts students on social media and pressuring them to file a complaint against me with the university's Title IX office. He predicted that there would be "trouble" ahead. The Title IX offices, whose campus authority comes from the federal government, have been the subject of controversy for some time in the U.S. For example, two years ago, the writer and professor Laura Kipnis (2017) published a widely reviewed book about the totalitarian Title IX procedures at Northwestern University, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*. On many campuses, the Title IX offices have usurped faculty authority and have become monitors and intrusive enforcers of a rigid political correctness.

I may have been the first professor to publicly warn about rising abuse of Title IX, a 1972 amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Act that was intended to eliminate sexual discrimination on college campuses. The polemical article that I wrote in 1996 for *USA Today* (in which I protested the elimination of the men's wrestling program at Princeton University) is reprinted in my 2017 book, *Free Women, Free Men* (2017: 102-104). There I denounced the "corrupt master class" of university administrators

"whose ranks have grotesquely swelled on U.S. campuses in the past 30 years and who have diverted the educational mission into a suffocating social-welfare ideology".

When I received that warning from my former student earlier this year, I was not concerned, because the University of the Arts has always been very supportive of my work from the start. Following the release in 1990 of *Sexual Personae*, there was a huge and prolonged controversy for several years, as I wrote newspaper opinion pieces that caused an uproar among old-guard feminists like Gloria Steinem, who compared me to Hitler. Despite the fact that I clearly represented a new faction in feminism (the pro-sex wing for whom Madonna was the icon), I was routinely condemned and slandered in national media in the U.S., U.K., and Europe. In 1991, there was an organized campaign by feminist groups (who appeared to be based in the Mid-Western U.S.) to pressure the president and founder of UArts, Peter Solmssen, to get me fired from my job. However, President Solmssen, like our admirable current president, David Yager, courageously responded to the complainants that my public work as a social analyst was fully protected by academic freedom.

What must be stressed here is that my teaching career at the University of the Arts has had no connection whatever with my professional activity as a writer. My first book was not published until six years after I began teaching here. Until the recent arrival of social media, there has never been the slightest intrusion or disruption from my international celebrity or notoriety. My students have rarely had any idea at all that I write books. I do not teach "my" ideas in the classroom, nor would I ever assign my books as required texts - as do so many narcissistic "star" academics in the U.S. Occasionally, a student may mention to me after our first class that his or her father or mother is a fan of mine, but nothing more. I have always maintained a discreet low profile on campus and (despite constant requests) have never permitted outsiders to visit my classes. As I have repeatedly said, I am simply a schoolteacher: that is my core identity, modeled on that of the teaching nuns of Italian and Iberian Catholicism!

Hence the atrocious amorality of social media being used as a weapon by ruthless ideologues to spread grotesque lies about my classes and to agitate students against me who do not know me and who have no idea whatever about the scholarly and interdisciplinary

expansiveness of my prolific published books and essays. Quotes taken out of context from my media interviews on a book tour were disseminated, but there was no reference whatever to the massive amount of material in all of my work that vividly glorifies and celebrates sexuality, gender fluidity, art, beauty, and radical individualism.

The young actress Selena Gomez recently said at Cannes, "Social media has been terrible for my generation" (MUMFORD, 2019). This incident at my university is a classic example of the destructiveness of social media for a generation that has tragically lost access to books. Because of competition from Amazon.com, bookstores have virtually vanished in the U.S., even in a major city like Philadelphia. It's incredible - I rarely see a bookstore anywhere, whereas they were once a standard feature of shopping malls. Book stores were cultural centers for my generation of the 1960s: as a student with little money, I learned a huge amount from roaming bookstores and leafing through books. But book reading has been in sharp decline for the younger generation, who now get all of their information online. For more than fifteen years, I have witnessed the increasing reluctance of students to go to the library to do research: they want everything instantly available at their fingertips. The heavy, dense physicality of books, which I adored as a student, now seems ponderous and boring to the young.

The problem with this fast-moving and unstoppable development is that only through book-reading does one learn how to follow or construct a sequential argument via deductive reasoning, where evidence is weighed and a conclusion reached. A generation raised on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has never been exposed to rational argumentation. In the online world, issues are simplistically polarized: "like" or "dislike"; thumbs up or thumbs down. It is a Manichaean universe of angels versus devils where no subtleties or qualifications are possible: you are either with us or against us.

This generation wed to social media is besieged all day long with dizzyingly disconnected fragments and strident appeals to emotion. They are swept into instant outrage, waves of panic, the blood lust of the Salem witch trials - which Arthur Miller invoked as a parallel to the vicious McCarthyism of the U.S. in his classic 1953 play, *The*

Crucible. Many young people seem uncertain, nervous, and lonely, desperate for group affiliation and validation, which is why they turn so quickly to mob action.

Young people today have had little or no exposure to dissident writers who cannot be easily classified in ideological terms. In my youth, there were many role models of bold, contrarian thought: Simone de Beauvoir, Mary McCarthy, Allen Ginsberg, Marshall McLuhan, Norman O. Brown, Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal. A quote from Kafka was widely publicized when I was in college: "A book should be the axe for the frozen sea within us". We correctly sought books that made us feel unsafe. Enlightenment, not emotional comfort, was our goal.

The epidemic hysteria of social media demonstrates the catastrophic failure of secular humanism, about which I have been warning for years. Although I am an atheist, I have enormous respect for the great world religions as vast symbol systems that provide a profound metaphysical perspective on life. Young people today who were raised without religion in progressive liberal homes have only politics to give their world shape and meaning. This is a very sad exchange, because politics, important and vital as it is, occupies a lower level of human existence. Marxist materialism, now the universal creed of Western academe, sees nothing in the universe beyond itself.

I feel very fortunate to have attended college when the 1960s counterculture was suffused with spiritual themes from Hinduism and Buddhism, which could be heard even in popular music. It was also a great period for international art films, which introduced us to world multiculturalism and which presented us with a super-sophisticated vision of sexuality. My mind was saturated with and transformed by those great films, from Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheus* and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* to Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* and Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* - which taught us about multiplicity and subjectivity of perspective on human events.

Compare those cultural riches to the monotonous banality of current heavily commercialized and mechanically digitized popular culture. It is no mystery why young people are desperately looking for meaning. Unfortunately, they are looking in the wrong places. Social media are a war zone of anxious illusions, like the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave. No stability or security will ever be found there. And injecting

politics with the cosmic dualism of good versus evil will never bring truth, wisdom, or peace of spirit.

Some of your recent statements have been seen, especially by critics on the Left and in the gender studies sectors (such as Judith Butler, who attacked you in an interview in *O Globo*, 2019) as support for Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. How do you respond to that accusation?

Those who live in a closed ideological bubble cannot understand anything outside of it. I have repeatedly drawn public attention to the scarcity of evidence that Judith Butler, whose academic training was in philosophy and whose methodology is poststructuralist, has undertaken the extensive historical and scientific research necessary for a professor who presents herself as an expert on gender and sexuality.

My political affiliation is well-known. I am a registered Democrat who voted for the Leftist Bernie Sanders in the 2016 presidential primary and then for Jill Stein of the Green Party in the general election. Each year, I contribute financially to the Green Party. I have every right to criticize the Left when its behavior and tactics foolishly insult and alienate mainstream voters and push them toward the Right. This is exactly what happened before the surprise election of both Trump and Bolsonaro.

It is a fact of world history that when social anxieties and urgent problems are not addressed by a self-absorbed ruling elite, there is a movement to the Right by ordinary citizens, who feel that only a crude, vigorous, ultra-macho "hero" figure will smash the impasse and finally get things done. These loud, strutting, egotistical figures often offer a restoration of national identity and sense of destiny - versus the smug insularity of the affluent elite, who are "cosmopolitan" in their assumptions, associations, and peripatetic life style and who scorn patriotism as simplistic and naive.

This is how both Hitler and Mussolini rose to power. Mussolini "made the trains run on time". Hitler promoted pride in medieval German identity after the humiliation of defeat in World War One, and he campaigned against the "divine decadence" (to quote Christopher Isherwood's Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*) of Weimar

Berlin - with its vast erotic landscape of organized prostitution, open homosexuality, and lavish drag balls.

It must be stressed that I happily identify myself as a gender-bending creature of Weimar decadence - which deeply shaped the Berlin-born Marlene Dietrich, whose sophisticated bisexual ambiguities and armored style of "hard glamour" can be traced down through Hollywood history to Madonna and drag queens in performance throughout the world today.

Decadence has been a central theme in my work - from the subtitle of *Sexual Personae (Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson)* to my signature course, *Aestheticism and Decadence*, which I taught multiple times during the 1970s and '80s at Bennington, Wesleyan, Yale, and the University of the Arts. However, I no longer dare to teach *Aestheticism and Decadence* because the sexual material (such as the novels of the Marquis de Sade, one of the greatest and most daring writers of the last 250 years) is too intense and problematic for today's students.

In college, I was heavily influenced by Andy Warhol's Factory, a decadent cell of Weimar Berlin transplanted to New York and populated by his flamboyant drag and transgender Superstars. Ever since I saw Warhol's early black-and-white short films in the mid-1960s (above all, *Harlot*, starring Mario Montez in drag), I have called myself a "Warholite". This is why the cover image of my most recent book, *Provocations* (2018), is my photo altered to imitate the lurid polychrome style of a Warhol painting (The Warhol Foundation very graciously granted permission).

However, as a scholar, I see history clearly and unsentimentally, without distortion from personal preferences or loyalties. It was during my laborious research for my Yale doctoral dissertation at that great Gothic shrine, Sterling Memorial Library, that I discovered an ominous pattern in history: civilizations are often cyclic, with distinct recurring patterns that are registered in art. "Late" phases of culture are frequently characterized by highly elaborate "ironic" styles, open homosexuality, and a fascination with androgyny, subverting traditional social and religious norms.

Signs of a counter-reaction or backlash may be perceptible, but the sophisticated elite, complacent in their refined "tolerance" and their control of major institutions and

communications, ignore them. Time passes. Then a giant wave seems to come from nowhere - from a marginalized social stratum or from marauding outsiders - and an entire over-complex society is overwhelmed and disintegrates.

This is exactly what happened during the Roman Empire, whose religion had become empty and formulaic. A puritanical spiritual movement began among the poor and dispossessed in the Eastern Mediterranean and slowly spread until it swept Roman paganism away. It was called Christianity, and it is still thriving two millennia later - even as we continue digging up broken remnants of the grandeur that was Rome.

Hence my conviction that those who see history, following Rousseau and Marx, in utopian terms as a linear march of ascending progress have done insufficient study of the dark record of mankind. Every civilization has eventually fallen, even ancient Egypt, which lasted for three millennia. Leftists seem to assume that "tolerance" is incremental and cumulative and that aggressively suppressing contrary beliefs is useful and beneficial - when in fact censorship of free speech merely forces key ideas underground, where they spread without detection until it is too late.

Again and again since the birth of Leftism in France in the late eighteenth century, Leftist leaders have drifted into an arrogant elitism, asserting that they know what is best for "the People", whom they define as childishly unable to think for themselves. What "the People" actually want and believe becomes irrelevant to Leftist strategists, who curtail free expression for their own agenda, create intrusive, inefficient bureaucracies, and start to turn on each other, assassinating dissidents in a new Reign of Terror.

That is how the French people got Napoleon. The revolutionaries overthrew and executed a king, but then, persecuting and murdering each other, they reduced France to anarchy. So the populace who had toppled a king got an emperor - Napoleon, crowned in Notre Dame by the Pope! And France was already embarked on a grandiose mission of imperial ambition that would bring death and destruction to millions in Europe and Russia.

Throughout your career, you have strongly emphasized the importance of the humanities - especially the history of art, comparative religion, and military

history - for building a new mental environment for citizens in the democratic world. However, you have repeatedly criticized poststructuralist gender studies. Why?

Yes, I am a passionate believer in the power of art to reveal the ultimate truths about human experience. An education in the arts, which should begin in the earliest years of schooling, would introduce the young to great poetry, music, and visual art from all around the world. The arts engage and develop different parts of the brain, some of which are rooted in our primeval life in nature, before the birth of civilization. Both the creation and the appreciation of art are deeply connected to the dream process, a visionary state to which everyone descends at night, even though our travels there are often erased by dawn.

I have been attacking the poisonous cynicism and ignorant philistinism of poststructuralism for three decades now. My most extended statement was "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf", a lengthy article in *Arion* in 1991 that was reprinted in my first essay collection, *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (1992: 170-248). There I demonstrated in exhaustive detail how the academic poststructuralists use opaque and labyrinthine jargon to conceal their own huge gaps in basic historical and cultural knowledge. For example, they naively attribute to Michel Foucault ideas that he borrowed without attribution from prior sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Erving Goffman. Furthermore, I sharply criticized how academic Leftism had become big business, a mercenary path to career advancement. Most people outside the U.S. do not realize that the major academic Leftists in this country are very shrewd operators who have become multi-millionaires at the elite universities.

Two decades after "Junk Bonds", I did another assessment of the state of poststructuralism when the *Chronicle of Higher Education* asked me to review three new books by young women academics on bondage and domination, a chic new field in gender studies. That piece, "Scholars in Bondage", was reprinted in my book, *Free Women, Free Men* (2017: 191-210). I was horrified by how clumsy, repetitious, and superficial poststructuralist analysis had become. These three intelligent, well-intentioned women authors were struggling to find their voices amid the ugly junk

of poststructuralist terminology, which had been forced on them by their elders for career survival. Meanwhile, their factual knowledge of the history of sexuality, even in modern times, was pitifully limited and truncated.

It should never have been left to far Right agitators or Christian evangelicals to say the obvious: that gender studies, as it is presently constituted, is a monolithic cult that preaches a heavily politicized ideology, from which the study of biology was illogically banished from the start. Gender studies, soaked in the paranoid and coldly desensitized premises of poststructuralism, was not founded upon scholarly principles and shows no wish to acquire them.

Young people, naturally interested in sex and gender as vital themes in their lives, are being unethically indoctrinated by these programs, which have spread internationally from their origins in the U.S. and U.K. To understand sex and gender, you must study a wide range of world history, anthropology, and biology. But gender studies, which rarely permits dissenting views, has become an authoritarian fiefdom, divorced from social reality.

Brazil has its own civilization, a brilliant marriage of art and nature. The fantastic impersonations and dazzling artifice of Carnival are set against the sublime grandeur of mountain, sea, river, and sky. By what pretentious hollowness have Brazilian academics turned away from that beauty and majesty to import the exhausted clichés of poststructuralism?

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Notes

¹ This interview was originally published in Portuguese on the website of the Estado de São Paulo newspaper, on 31st May 2019.

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