

Creation

Hans Boutellier

Column – April 7, 2004

We live in a time without illusions. Its utopian yearning is for security. Fear and unease are so prevalent that we can think of nothing else but fighting them. The police and the criminal justice system have become the agents of our yearnings, and we cannot get enough of this. We are trapped like a rabbit in the headlights: paralyzed with fear and unable to get away. I expect artists to manage to escape the powerlessness of the present time. Art does not have to please, but it could offer some support.

A few months ago I saw a performance of the oratorio *Die Schöpfung* by Haydn at the Finlandia Hall in Helsinki. The musical composition of the Creation story was simply overwhelming. But what especially struck me was the unembarrassed sense of jubilation about the beauty of nature and of humanity. It dawned on me that the power, the joy and the solace this composition expressed are out of date. I think few artists these days feel compelled to celebrate Creation in such an exuberant way.

But why? It seems art is being guided by the idea that there is little to celebrate. It prefers to focus on the Fall and on the unmasking of beauty as kitsch, of love as a trap and of human motives as terror. I realize general statements about art are dilettante-ish and criticism of modern art practice quickly smells of grousing. And yet I am often unable to shake off a feeling of disillusionment upon visiting a museum of modern art. A lot of concepts but little inspiration.

In essence there are three sources for providing impulses to a culture devoid of illusions. We cannot expect this of politics – the first candidate. Its pragmatic and mediagenic course can no longer be turned back. Something similar applies to the second candidate, religion. Religious faith is an individual matter and will not experience a revival as a cultural factor. From the Muslims we would prefer no organized religious movement.

When it comes to inspiration, I still base my hopes most on the art and culture sector. For a long time – too long – this has been dominated by the motif of unmasking. The inquiry into the deepest if not the lowest motives of human beings (Bataille!) seems to me to have been sufficiently carried out by now. Indeed, if we look at some commercial television programmes, the results of this examination have become common property. The inquiry into human perversion has made it commonplace and thereby become superfluous.

Pornography and violence have become normalized and thereby have acquired a new significance. They *abnormalize* restraint, vulnerability and the inquiry into moralities. This is not a call for decency in art or for a reintroduction of hypocrisy. It is, however, a plea for a new cultural élan, which must come from the people who have traditionally dared to venture down unbeaten paths. I yearn for new (or in fact old) representations of – ahem – love or reformulations of the battle between good and evil.

The old culture has been sufficiently dismantled to look for new potential in its foundations. This requires time (and means), which might best be used in studying texts and images that have survived, or in fact in making new ones that have not yet been appropriated by the culture of security. In the current utopian yearning for security lurks the danger of a totalitarian dream of power, but also a spark of hope. I yearn for the hope of creation.

Hans Boutellier is Professor in Safety and Citizenship at VU University in Amsterdam and executive director of the Verwey-Jonker Institute in Utrecht; board member of Kei, expert centre for urban regeneration; member of the board of trustees of the Wiardi Beckman Foundation; board member of the Association of Policy Research and member of the editorial committee of the European Journal of Criminology.

Tags

Art Discourse

This text was downloaded on February 17, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/creation