

THE FIERY ANGEL: ART, CULTURE, SEX, POLITICS, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF THE WEST

(MICHAEL WALSH)

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Billed as a continuation, this book is really the chiral image of Michael Walsh's earlier book, *The Devil's Pleasure Palace*. That book was an attempt, with limited success, to outline and discuss the poisonous Frankfurt School of political philosophy, Critical Theory, through the prism of art. This book, on the other hand, aims to discuss art, with Critical Theory as the subtext. It is a largely successful attempt to outline and discuss the unparalleled genius of Western art, in its historical context and with its historical implications, and thereby to "restore Western culture to its proper place." That restoration is necessary for our culture to cauterize the venomous bite of the Frankfurt School, whose view of art as politics, and of Western culture as worthless and evil, must be rejected if the West is to regain its path.

By nature, I am unresponsive to most art and therefore deficient in knowledge about it. That makes me the type of person who can benefit most from this book. It's not that I don't like art—certainly, the cover of this book, a subdued halftone version of Guido Reni's painting *The Archangel Michael Defeating Satan*, is awesome. But being shown why art matters is extremely helpful to make ready for the wars to come (or, more accurately, the wars that are now beginning). In fact, all those who lack an appreciation for the art of the West, and what it has meant to our culture, should read this book, or be made to read this book. This includes most of all the young, say those under thirty-five, who, because of the triumph of Critical Theory, have almost all been exposed to exactly none of the art or themes contained within it.

Walsh's central point, though he often strays far afield, is that the West is built around the Heroic Narrative, and that narrative, in all its manifestations, is the target of Critical Theory. Although Walsh does not mention it, the Heroic Narrative has gotten a large amount of press in a widening set of circles over the past six months, because of the rise to prominence of Jordan Peterson, who makes this a key theme of his philosophy. Walsh's claim is that Western art embodies this narrative, and therefore works of great Western art are the bane

of cultural Marxists (i.e., those who espouse Critical Theory), because they seek to destroy all norms of heroism and virtue. I note, though Walsh does not, that the destroying of cultural norms, which are visible in and subsumed within the art of our civilization, is merely a logical continuation of the long-running Enlightenment project to emancipate everyone into forced equality combined with unfettered absolute liberty, Ryszard Legutko's "coercion to freedom," so the cultural Marxists are not necessarily a break with the Enlightenment project, merely its final avatars. In any case, Walsh's project is to oppose the forces of decline in the West, where a combined lack of virility and fertility is having fatal consequences, while finding a way forward and upward, through "an understanding and appreciation of the culture we seek to defend."

To find this way forward, Walsh alternates discussion of specific works of art with insightful commentary. The commentary revolves around the intertwining of art and politics, although it is elliptical and covers many side topics. So, for example, Walsh draws lines from the art of Beaumarchais, through intervening political events and works of art, to the overthrow of the French monarchy and the rise of Napoleon. His point is not some kind of determinism, or even necessary causation, but that art has consequences, and in retrospect there is a causal link between art and what happens thereafter, an "artistic canary in the coal mine." "[W]hile art acts politically, commenting on the moral dilemmas and exigencies of the past, and affecting the way we envision the future, it is not and should never be merely a reflective appendage of politics—a transposition, as it were, of a political program into another medium, for popular consumption." Such transposition is the nature of Critical Theory, and it is both irrational and destructive of a culture and its art (for, certainly, the final triumph of Critical Theory would not lead to some sort of new high art, but the level of art found under any analogous totalitarian Communist regime).

The fiery angel of the book's title is taken from Prokofiev's opera *The Fiery Angel*. Walsh thinks of opera as one of the highest, if not the highest, art form, a combination of literature and music (he correctly points out that musical appreciation is essentially completely vanished from the modern West, certainly in education). Prokofiev's opera, apparently obscure and not often performed, takes place in sixteenth-century Germany, and revolves around an angel of uncertain beneficence, who

may exist only in the imagination of the protagonist, a woman probably possessed by the Devil who is burned at the stake in the last scene. Sounds fun. Walsh's point, to the extent he has a clear point (he tends to have a lot of points), is that the opera is a set of historical and philosophical allusions to the past history of Germany. Knowledge of a culture's history is the key to understanding that civilization, and Critical Theory attempts to both deny a culture's real history, and to replace it with a false history of supposed oppression and evil—something it is our duty to resist.

From there, Walsh explores the confrontation of evil, in a line from Greek drama onward. The Heroic Narrative, in which confrontation is by definition involved, has evinced a good deal of syncretism (wrongly denigrated by the heirs of the Frankfurt School as “cultural appropriation”), as Walsh shows. The moral content of this art is critical—it should not be reduced to “mere myths or fairy tales,” or, worse, “made to seem manifestation of, say, the ‘patriarchy,’ or clear evidence of a conspiracy against women, homosexuals, and people of color.” Civilization is not defined by “politics and political programs”; rather, it is defined by how we perceive and practice virtue and morals, which withstand testing and opposition, even strengthening as a result of challenge, and which are not the same as desiccated and changeable “values,” which are simply cant without substance, and the sign of a decayed society. Art, not politics, is the main field on which a civilization confronts and comes to understand evil, and ultimately triumphs.

Moving onwards, Walsh explores art such as Géricault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, basically for the point that there is a political subtext to the painting, but it is a subtext, and the focus is on the suffering and hope of the human beings portrayed, and their heroic struggle with nature. He discusses the theme of childbearing and barrenness, “the light of the sacred flame, borne by the eternal feminine,” through art such as Jacques Daret's painting *The Visitation* and Richard Strauss's opera *The Woman Without a Shadow*, noting in passing the total falsehood of the Frankfurt School's claim that women have had inferior status and therefore historically been oppressed in the West (the fact that one even has to think whether that is true is, you will note, a sign of the success of their propaganda). Along these same lines, he discusses at length the ancient and archetypal story of Beauty and the Beast, with its celebration

of the difference, and necessary interdependence, between male and female. I note that Jordan Peterson, as is often commented on, despises the movie *Frozen* as a propaganda vehicle, because it pretends that this interdependence can be ignored in favor of unitary female supremacy. Of course, that is a near universal theme among movies directed at children today—the heroic woman, of a type never found in real life, displaying the masculine virtues and rejecting the feminine ones, who alone pursues a path of (often violent) success and childless domination. Critical Theory must destroy the very concept of the Beast, since “he gives the lie to the sexual relativism promulgated by the modern Left,” who wish all men were Alan Alda (though certainly, because nature, women ensnared by cultural Marxism do not, whatever they may claim). Walsh compounds this offense to the Left by quoting Camille Paglia, in a diatribe by her against the idea that great art can only be made by good people, that “the impulse or compulsion toward art making is often grounded in ruthless aggression and combat—which is partly why there have been so few great women artists.”

Other chapters discuss the development of the art form of tragedy, from Aristotle’s analysis on, and how it relates to the Heroic Narrative, with its “irrational desire, or confidence, to wager everything in pursuit of the better.” On a related theme, Walsh bemoans the failure of the West to embrace the heroism of the Crusades, once celebrated in works from Torquato Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered* and, derived from Tasso’s work, Montaverdi’s *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, with its tragic exaltation of the prince of Antioch, the Italian-Norman nobleman Tancred. Instead, today we have modern Europe, about which nothing really needs to be said, and of which nothing good can be said, when compared to the vibrancy of Tancred. In America, the Frankfurt School and its progeny oppose the crusading instinct; they would tear everything down and replace it with narratives of victimhood and oppression, imploding our culture like the house in the final scene of the movie *Poltergeist* (not an image Walsh uses—it’s probably too lowbrow for him). He talks about the crucial Western theme of choice and resulting destiny, rather than passive acceptance of a dictated Fate, as shown in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Choice and destiny imply the need to show intrinsic worth and demonstrated value in accomplishing necessary tasks; they are undermined by tolerance of evil, perversity, and

diversity that is divorced (as it always is today, as mandated by cultural Marxists) from excellence and is the opposite of socially beneficial. And still other chapters discuss everything from Bluebeard to Beaumarchais's (and Mozart's) *The Marriage of Figaro*, relating them all to the themes that have characterized the West, as well as, in some cases, to the political results of the art produced.

Walsh closes by noting that the Heroic Narrative is not cyclical or static—on the contrary, productive flux is a necessary requirement for a dynamic civilization. “Either a culture is moving forward—not in the ‘progressive’ sense, but as exemplified by the voyages of discovery that marked European cultural and political expansion starting in the fifteenth century and which should continue in the future into outer space—or it is dying. Once a culture loses its crusading instinct, it dies.” Such a state characterizes much of the advanced world, including Europe and Japan, for they have lost the virtues shown in the art that Walsh discusses. The result is no drives for excellence or achievement; no sex (other than perverted sex); no children; no demand for excellence; the politicization of everything; no higher goals. All mean cultural death, and ultimately, extinction.

The question is, for America, who will win this fight, for unlike in Europe and Japan, it's not over yet. (Well, Hungary and Poland are fighting back, so it is not truly over yet there either.) Actually, that's Walsh's question, as stated above. My question is a bit different—by what specific actions can we win? The Frankfurt School has been winning for decades, so how do we reverse that? Certainly, I agree with the analysis and the goal, but talking about art is not kinetic enough to throw them down from their seats of power.

That is a particular focus of mine, and a longer analysis than fits here. But I do want to add a specific piece to the puzzle. I think that Walsh's throwaway comment about outer space and “voyages of discovery” is a critical element of American renewal, and of a possible renewal of the West. I think space, the final frontier, is part of the key to cultural rebirth, as odd a claim as that seems at first. We should not forget that great art is rarely produced by static cultures all of whose artists are focused on home and hearth. It is mostly produced by artists who embody the drivers of culture, carried along on the tides of its progress, informed by the vibrancy of its desires and accomplishments, from religion to

conquest. Whatever may be the advantages to our society of localism and community, and however important those may be to societal renewal, we need trips to Mars too, and beyond. The Heroic Narrative was once conquering Jerusalem. We can reconquer Jerusalem, to be sure, though it has fortunately changed hands recently already, and with a few expulsions and demolitions we can share it amicably with its current owners. But the Heroic Narrative must change its external focuses with the time, and that means using modern technology and adopting a changed external focus with the same timeless internal themes and drives. Just as the Bronze Age gave way to the Classical World, our world is changing. It does not matter that the Enlightenment Age is ending; it had little to do with forward progress, politically or socially, and nothing at all to do with scientific progress in the West (the only place there has ever been any relevant scientific progress). We can't all just be down on the farm; we need generation starships as well. We need that quest for glory, strengthening social unity through a common goal of achievement without harming smaller-scale daily life and subsidiarity. We need stronger community through conquering new worlds, not the atomization and self-focus of consumption. We need to combine high science with a return to high culture, of which high art is a critical element, as Walsh devotes his book to demonstrating.

There is, I think, and I am sure Walsh would agree, no point in discussing any of this with acolytes of the Frankfurt School. Either Michael the Archangel will defeat them, or they will defeat the Archangel. There is no other choice, and there can be no further coexistence. We have reached the end of comity and sharing the same space. Their beliefs, and what they demand, are known and seen clearly enough. The only question is when their beliefs will lead them to engage in widespread, rather than sporadic, violence against their enemies, as they see their power eroding in the new dispensation and take the only action possible. Still, Walsh's book has potentially quite a bit of benefit in the burgeoning conflict, to inspire us, and to show foot soldiers of the Left, bewitched by the cultural Marxists, the existence and meaning of Western art, thereby breaking the spell cast on them during their trip through the institutions of education and business that indoctrinate the young. We may not be able to turn the Beast back into a handsome young man through the power of love; but if we kill the Beast instead,

maybe he can be brought back to life in his proper guise, which, in the end, will accomplish the same goal.