

Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy

Michael S. Sherry

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What to the following individuals have in common?

Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Franz Schubert, Gustav Mahler, Henry James, George Santayana, Walt Whitman, John Cheever, Oscar Wilde, W.H. Auden, F. O. Matthiessen, Jack Kerouac, Rudolf Nureyev, Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Cole Porter, Ian McClellan, George Frideric Handel, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Samuel Barber, Thornton Wilder, Dirk Bogarde, Edward Albee, Jasper Johns, Paul Bowles, Truman Capote, Montgomery Clift, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Hart Crane, Herman Melville, James Dean, Philip Johnson, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, John Cage, Ned Rorem, Andy Warhol, Christopher Isherwood, Jean Genet, Johannes Brahms, Van Cliburn, Franco Zeffirelli, Hubert Selby, Anthony Perkins, Robert Mapplethorpe, Terrance McNally, and William Inge.

All of them were or are artists—broadly defined, Philip Johnson was an architect. As far as I know, they are all white gentiles of European heritage. And all of them are reputed to be other than strictly heterosexual in orientation.

And all of them are mentioned in Michael S. Sherry's worthy book, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy*. Sherry is a professor of history at Northwestern University and is himself gay. (Disclosure: I'm heterosexual). In line with his professional orientation Sherry's book is essentially historical; note that none of the above list of names is in the prime of their careers. Sherry focuses on the mid-twentieth century. Characteristically, he devotes a chapter to the composer Samuel Barber (1910-1981), whose peak years were during the 1940s and '50s. Barber had a long-time personal as well as professional relationship with another well-known composer, Gian Carlo Minotti.

I chose to list only white gentiles above because this journal [The Occidental Quarterly] and its sponsoring organization, The Charles Martel Society, focuses on Western thought and opinion from the perspective of the status and wellbeing of white gentiles; and this is also a central concern of mine. And it is a legitimate concern—the circumstance and fate of any group of people on this planet is an important matter--and it will be the perspective of this essay/review. It should be noted, however, that it is not Sherry's perspective in this book. His lens for analyzing and assessing reality is gays; that's his group, and clearly he is a gay advocate, in the same way that someone might be an advocate of Jews or blacks or white gentiles.

Among the Jewish artists Sherry discusses are Aaron Copeland, Gertrude Stein, Allen Ginsberg, and Leonard Bernstein (who although married led an active gay life). Sherry reports that Bernstein's notorious fundraising cocktail party in Manhattan for the Black Panthers in the 1960s was described by writer James McCourt as "an effort by the Uptown Homintern to appear radical without doing anything so socially compromising as coming out." Sherry devotes a good amount of space to describing the creation of the hit Broadway show, and later successful film, *West Side Story*, in which the entire creative team was both Jewish and gay: Bernstein for the music and, along with Stephan Sondheim, the lyrics; Arthur Laurents for the book; and Jerome Robbins for the direction. (Another gay, Ernest Lehman, wrote the screenplay for the film.)

The only black that Sherry discusses at length is the writer James Baldwin. He mentions the dance choreographer Alvin Ailey, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and writer Alice Walker.

Women don't get much play in Sherry's book either. Besides the two listed in the opening paragraph and the two black women just mentioned, he refers briefly to the writer Adrienne Rich, anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, fifties pop singer Patti Page, and the film director Claire Denis. The one woman who gets a lot of space in the book is the essayist Susan Sontag. In four different chapters Sherry quotes extensively from her classic essay written in the 1960s, "Notes on Camp." Interesting to me, Sherry never identifies Sontag as a homosexual. She was, which included a relationship of long standing with the photographer Annie Liebowitz, who recently published a collection of photos that

included some depicting Sontag's last days in her losing battle with cancer.

Beyond including comedian Margaret Cho in a long list of names, I don't recall any reference in Sherry's book to Asians. Personally, I have been very taken with the work of two gay Japanese artists active during the period Sherry focuses upon in the book, the writer, Yukio Mishima, and the film director, Yasujiro Ozu. For my perspective on the two, refer to the "thoughts" section of my website.¹ You'll notice that my connection with Mishima and Ozu doesn't center on sex but rather the overall quality of their art and the messages about living in general I derived from their work. What is of interest in this context is the extent to which what I picked up on in these two artists grew out of, and was prompted by, their sexuality. My best guess is that to a great extent it was, and that makes this topic an extremely important one to me personally.

The subtitle of Sherry's book is "An Imagined Conspiracy," and I never could figure out why. The book isn't about people alleging that gays are all working together in an organized plot of some kind to shape or subvert the culture. Rather, it deals with whether or not gays have had an impact on American culture, and, if they have, the nature of that impact. Is there an identifiable gay sensibility? Is there something about being gay that results in particular outlook, or collection of outlooks, and a particular way, or collection of ways, of expressing oneself artistically? Much of *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture* is devoted to Sherry's accounts of what people, both straight and gay, had to say about that, especially in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. As I read along, while I was sure that, overall, Sherry is sympathetic to gays and making the case for them, I never felt clear about his stance relative to each of the specific claims he recounts. Was he simply reporting it? Was he debunking it? Was he agreeing with it? Where is he on all these assertions? I asked myself. Mishima's book *Confessions of a Mask* came to mind: somehow Sherry seemed behind a mask, or another way to put it, not quite in the room.²

In the last page of the book, Sherry quotes the arts critic Jeff Weinstein as writing, "No, there is no such thing as a gay sensibility, and yes, it has had an enormous impact on the culture." Sherry then offers: "To leave a paradox standing defies the historian's duty to explain, but history is often a paradox." And then he adds,

“[M]idcentury gay creativity occurred because of oppression, but also because oppression had limits, and for reasons having little to do with it. An untidy formula, to be sure, but more accurate about the past and optimistic about the future than a fond embrace of the sad beauties presumably produced by gay artists facing oppression.”

I find Sherry terse and elliptical when using his own voice throughout the book, and this last section is no exception. It appears he is concluding that gay artistic expressions in the mid-century years were to a large extent a function of the negative circumstances in which gays lived in those years, and that as circumstances change, so too will gay art. He refers to “oppression,” and it would have helped if he had been clearer about what he means by that term. I recently read the journals of playwright Tennessee Williams and he frequently referred to the personal rejection and cruelty gays experience from their earliest years.³ Would Sherry include these personal slights within his concept of oppression? I could only speculate.

I’m also left to guess what Sherry means by the statement that gay creativity occurred in part for reasons having little to do with oppression. Is he talking about biology, internal chemistry, factors and forces inherent in the same-sex relationship itself, family dynamics, what? My read of Sherry is that his philosophy and politics are left of center, and that he is going to emphasize the influence of external circumstances rather than factors within the individual when explaining why something goes on—but again, that’s a presumption.

Sherry seems to be affirming that, indeed, gay artists have had a significant impact on American culture. I came to the book believing that, and Sherry’s presentation reinforced that view. As far as I can see, however, he doesn’t spell out exactly what themes or emphases he considers the most central, salient, in gay art, and precisely what he believes to be the impact gay art has had on American culture. What he does do, though, and it is an important contribution, is provide a great deal of material for readers to work with in coming to their own determinations about that. Sherry is a thorough researcher, and this book offers much food for thought.

For readers that are antagonistic toward gays, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture* serves up many arrows for their quiver. Below are some examples. They date back a good number of years and might

ring unseemly to modern sensibilities, but then again, I suspect that more than a few in our time, including some white racialists, can resonate with these sentiments in both tone and substance:

- The composer Charles Ives excoriated many European composers as “pansies,” “lily-pads,” “old ladies,” and “pussy-boys.”
- The historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., criticized homosexuals for their “soft” leftism, cliquishness, and lack of mature manliness.
- The psychologist Albert Ellis maintained that homosexuals “are almost invariably neurotic or psychotic.” Gay artists, Ellis argued, “cannot devise new solutions to artistic and scientific problems” and “are the most imitative, most conventional, and most acceptance-demanding people in our ultra-conforming culture.” I must admit this slur did bring up for me the prevalence, or lack of it, of gays on the cutting edge of science and computer technology.
- Novelist Philip Roth attacked Edward Albee’s play *Tiny Alice* for its “tediousness, its pretentiousness, its galling sophistication, its gratuitous and easy symbolizing, and its ghastly pansy rhetoric and repartee [this last one a criticism I used to hear privately offered about the television sitcom “Frasier”].” Disguise is the villain in all this, declared Roth: “How long,” he asked rhetorically, “before a play is produced on Broadway in which the homosexual hero is presented as a homosexual and not disguised as an *angst*-ridden priest, or an angry Negro, or an aging actress; or worst of all, Everyman?”
- A 1966 *Time* magazine piece concluded that homosexuality is a “pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from life, that deserves fairness, compassion, and understanding” but “no pretense that it is anything but a pernicious sickness.” The article pointed out gays’ “vengeful, derisive counterattack” on the straight world.” It embraced writer Somerset Maugham’s view that queers “lacked deep seriousness” and had only a “wonderful gift for delightful embroidery.” What makes the Maugham especially interesting is the fact that he lived in a homosexual relationship with a man named Gerald Paxton for almost thirty years until Paxton’s death.

- And then there was Midge Decter, who in a 1980 *Commentary* magazine essay shared with readers that she found most gay men to be “mama’s boys,” alcoholic, adolescent in personality, and unhappy, and prone to “drugs, sadomasochism, and suicide,” and the “obliteration of all experience, if not, indeed, of oneself.”

Increasingly over the last few years, and without doing it consciously, I have engaged the work of gay artists and attended to their life examples. I feel I have been uplifted by this encounter and that I am better off, both personally and professionally, for the experience. All to say, the bullet points just offered don’t speak for me. In these next pages, I’ll draw from Sherry’s book to list five things that draw me to gay art, and discuss their significance with reference to white racialism: a shorthand term for the people and organizations and ideas and ways that have been a big part of my life for the last decade, and that I care very much about.

The quality of the art. Look over the names that lead off this review—Michelangelo, da Vinci, Henry James, and on through the list. That represents some great art, and simply, I don’t want to die without experiencing at least a fair sampling of it. These past few days I read a collection of John Cheever’s short stories.⁴ Great writing; I was moved, transported. Earlier in my life I was in a modern dance company and am very interested in dance. Dance doesn’t come better than that choreographed by Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor. And so on. I don’t want any movement I’m associated with denigrating the artistic accomplishments of people because of their sexual orientation and concerns about their political and cultural directions and thereby discouraging people from experiencing them, and I worry that white racialism does that.

The insights I gain from it. Sherry quotes social scientist Donald Webster Cory, who argues that, as outsiders, gays “see this stream of humanity, its morals and mores, its values and goals, its assumptions and concepts, from without.” Often those on the margin bring a fresh, call it anthropological, perspective to the ways and possibilities of a culture. Tennessee Williams has said that the cruelty and hurt gays experience results in greater sensitivity, and prompts them to look deeper into themselves and the human spirit.

In recent months I have been immersed in the films of the Japanese director referred to above, Yasujiro Ozu. (And yes, I think I can love my Western heritage and my race without closing myself off to the art and wisdom of other peoples.) On my web site I wrote the following about three of Ozu's films:

I feel as if I am different for having seen these three films, that the person I am, the entity I experience as me, has shifted, that I'm more sensitive and softer in a good way and more grounded than before. I believe if I had seen these films when I was young—I'm old now—I would have viewed life differently and lived it differently than I have. I wish I had known to see them back then. Time has run out for me; I can't start over, it's too late.⁵

The late Revilo P. Oliver, a classics professor at the University of Illinois and a prominent and highly respected defender of the Western heritage and white racist, wrote of the need to be "a man who is willing to learn from the accumulated experience of mankind." "He must strive," Oliver asserted, "to observe dispassionately and objectively, and he must reason from his observations with full awareness of the limitations of reason. And he must, above all, have the courage to confront the unpleasant realities of human nature and the world in which we live."⁶ Indeed, it is not just Western heterosexuals that can help us confront the realities of our nature and the world in which we live.

It brings me back to the reality of my life. Recently, I watched an interview with the French director Bruno Dumont ("Humanite," "Twenty-nine Palms") that was one of the features on a DVD of one of his films. From watching Dumont's films, I pick up that he is gay. The interviewer asked Dumont what matters to him in his life. Dumont answered that making good films matters greatly to him—he gives his all to his work. But still, what matters most of all to him, Dumont said, is his own existence. In gay art there is an emphasis on the private, the personal, and I have found that to be, for me, a healthy counterbalance to the public, impersonal thrust of the white racist movement. The writings, the discourse generally, in white racism is predominantly about *it*, the fate of the West or the white race, immigration, government policy, what *they* said and did *over there*. And that is all fine and good. But at the same time,

it's rarely if ever about the person expressing whatever it is, or about you and me, how we are doing. In a book review for this journal I wrote:

[Chilton] Williamson's presentations focused on the collective: religion, culture, ideas, public issues, what it is all about, what we are, what we do, what we should do. Where does that leave *me*? I ask myself—this mortal, finite, human being sitting here in front of this computer on a Friday afternoon? And where does it leave *you*, the person reading this right now. . . . I care about the destiny of the West, but the truth of it is I spend most of my time thinking about friendship, love, sex, pleasure, honest expression, my mental and physical health, and finding a rewarding way to get through my day-to-day activities. And the truth of it is I'm going to attend to people whose work or life example informs these personal concerns.⁷

I read the contemporary novelist Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club*, *Choke*), whom I presume is gay. Palahniuk reflects a nihilistic perspective (nihilism is very much a part of the Western intellectual tradition). He deals with issues that confront people in their everyday lives like dealing with noise pollution, and the anger we feel and our desire for revenge. Palahniuk attacks rigid emotional restraint and foot-soldier loyalty to work and family and the state and the cause (whatever it happens to be). He writes about the body and sexuality, and about having fun. He writes about pissing in the soup of the big shots, the top dogs, the I'll-do-the-talking guys. Does this, in good part, come out of Palahniuk's sexuality, out of the fact that he has lived in a world that has said "get back," "get down," "not you" to people of his kind? My guess: yes, it does. Is this kind of irreverence a dimension of the Western heritage—yes, I think it is. The West, America in particular, has been about telling the pompous to f--- off. Palahniuk wrote the following inscription on my copy of his book *Lullaby*:

To Robert—

This is *your* life!!

[signed]
Chuck Palahniuk

I can relate to that and still care deeply about white people.

It emphasizes gentility and softness and kindness. Last year I was asked to review a book that profiled “real men” that had struck the favor of an editor of a CMS publication. (I wrote the review but it was never published.) All ten of the exemplary men in the book were head-of-the table, no-nonsense, tough guys—war heroes, football coaches, hard-charging entrepreneurs, those kinds of people. In the review I wrote the following (perhaps this is part of the reason it never got published):

As I read the profiles, I thought about what all this was saying about my father, slight of build, manicured, deferring, who ten hours a day, six days a week, stood on his feet with his arms raised cutting people’s hair, his shoulders throbbing as he got older, and rode the bus home every evening to be with my mother and me.⁸

My father is long dead, but would he be welcome in the racist movement? I’m not so sure.

I’m a sensitive, introspective, artistic type of person and have drawn inspiration from the American painter Robert Henri (1865-1929), whom I believe was gay. Henri exemplified and wrote about the artist’s way, as he called it, where one’s total life, including his vocation, is conducted artfully, from that impulse; or another way to say it, where one’s life is one’s art.⁹ I find Henri’s formulations appealing generally, and that they fit me. But I don’t think Pat Buchanan would take to Henri; or perhaps, me. What gay artists seem to be saying is that there is room in this world, including the white racist movement, for both me and Pat Buchanan. Or is that inaccurate?

Sherry reports that Arthur Laurents, who wrote the book for “West Side Story,” said it depicted a world of violence and prejudice in which the two lovers were trying to survive. The critic Deems Taylor said Tchaikovsky “felt great pity for the mental and spiritual invalid.” I am personally up to here with violence and harsh prejudice. And while I might choose different words than “pity” and “invalid,” I care deeply about people who are in pain. I’m in pain. Can people in pain be part of the racist movement? Do

they have to pretend they aren't in order to be white advocates and be included in the group and valued? For that matter, aren't we all in pain? Isn't that part of the reality of being a mortal human being?

Sherry quotes author Virgil Thompson: "The way to write American music is simple. All you have to be is an American and then write any kind of music you wish." What Thompson is saying is you don't have to be a certain kind of person and you don't have to conform to a particular creed to express yourself to the world. Even more basic, you don't have to stay silent or hidden or on the outside looking in if you aren't "normal" by somebody's definition. You have as much right to get on with what you do as anyone else. You are not behind anybody in line

A concern of mine is that white racialism equates acceptability, legitimacy, and morality with normality, with normality defined as being like the person doing the talking. Columnist Joseph Sobran is a superb writer. But still, nobody is above critique and criticism. I worry that some people get a pass in the white racist movement, and that Sobran is one of them. In a 2003 column, he wrote about his kind of people, those who "aren't easily bluffed" by gays.¹⁰ "When the abnormal claims to be normal," Sobran informs us, "their instinct is to respond not with arguments but with jokes ("Did you hear the one about the straight Episcopal bishop?"). . . . Even Stalin couldn't stamp out gay people. More powerful than armies is a wisecrack whose time has come." Frankly, there's a smugness and nastiness in some spokesmen for whites that is getting old for me. More, if we are perceived as smart-ass bigots we are going to stay on the periphery of American life.

Gay artists promote reflection and self-criticism. I think it fair to say that self-analysis and self-criticism are not hallmarks of white racialism. Rather, it is more the idea that we know the truth—there's no doubt about that. Our task is to get others to see things our way, the right way. Gay lives and creations shake up that certainty. They prompt us to think about the degree to which white racialists link the wellbeing of Western culture and white people to certain immutable and unquestioned orthodoxies: with reference to religion, ideology, politics, sexuality and gender relations, art, lifestyle, work and leisure, and schooling. As for the philosophical perspective associated with this journal, is paleoconservatism overly

collectivist, authoritarian, male-dominated, closed-minded, hero-worshipping, exclusionary (e.g., gay people), and intolerant of anybody who is different from its central spokesmen? The answer may be that white racialism and paleoconservatism are none of that, but the challenge, as I see it, is to calmly and maturely consider these questions and not scold, demonize, or exclude anyone among us who raises them.

Robert S. Griffin is the author, most recently, of *Living White: Writings on Race 2000-2005*.

Endnotes

1. “Three Films That Touched Me” (about Ozu), and “On Mishima,” in the “thoughts” section of my web site, www.robertsgriffin.com.
2. Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1958).
3. Tennessee Williams and Margaret Bradham Thorton (editor), *Notebooks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
4. John Cheever, *The Stories of John Cheever* (New York: Vintage, 2000).
5. “Three Films That Touched Me.”
6. The Oliver quote is from my book, *While There’s Time: Conservatism and Individualism in Education* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2005) p. 17.
7. See my review of *The Conservative Bookshelf: Essential Works That Impact Today’s Conservative Thinkers* by Chilton Williamson in *The Occidental Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 2005.
8. See my review of R. Cort Kirkland, *Real Men: Ten Courageous Americans To Know and Admire* (Nashville: Duke Cumberland House, 2005) in the “writings” section of my web site, www.robertsgriffin.com.

9. See “On Living the Artist’s Way” in the “thoughts” section of my web site, www.robertsgriffin.com.

10. See Sobran’s July 23, 2003 column, “A Gay Man’s Manifesto” at <http://www.sobran.com/columns/2003/030729.shtml>.