

# Regional Vigor

## The Ace Card of American Art

By Michael Medved

**N**ational reaction to the events of September 11 showed that New York maintains its indisputable dominance as cultural capital of the United States. Americans in all corners of the continent, though sometimes grumbling over the arrogance of New Yorkers, still look to the Big Apple as our country's main town. But the stunning resilience of our civilization in the wake of Terrorist Tuesday highlighted another under-appreciated facet of our culture—its true strength derives not from its concentration in one great center, but its dispersion across a wide variety of regional capitals of startling vitality. Our artistic strength is spread across the entire nation, just like our economic vigor.

Here in the Great Northwest, I attended the opening-night concert of the Seattle Symphony just four days after the nightmarish assaults on New York and Washington. The leadership of our great orchestra decided that the show must go on—despite the fact that the scheduled guest conductor, Andreas Delfs, couldn't arrive due to the stricken state of the air transport system. Seattle's own prodigiously gifted assistant conductor, Alastair Willis, stepped to the podium in his place, and led his hometown musicians with absolutely electrifying intensity. The orchestra played with blazing commitment, particularly in Aaron Copland's patriotic "Lincoln Portrait," with its eerily appropriate narration: "The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion." Many members of the audience rose and wept openly through their standing ovation.

Beyond the dramatics of that particular moment in history, the concertgoers felt exhilarated by the sheer aesthetic splendor of the experience: listening to one of the finest orchestras on earth in a gleaming new concert hall of unsurpassed acoustic splendor. If Benaroya Hall had been constructed in New York City or Los Angeles, we would read weekly stories in the international press

about its superb sonic qualities. But since this artistic grandeur flourishes in the Great North-wet, our own soggy though cozy corner of the continent, most connoisseurs in the rest of the country have not yet caught on to the overall excellence of the Seattle Symphony. It's probably better that way, for the sake of our city and for the general health of American high culture.

Once upon a time, every artist of appreciable talent and ambition—not only in music but also the theater, literature, painting, and other fields—made his way to New York City, draining regional centers of all vitality and consigning them to a permanent status of second-rate sleepiness. That is no longer the case, as performers and creators of international stature increasingly choose to associate themselves with artistic enterprises in the American boondocks.

Take our own situation in Seattle, where Maestro Gerard Schwarz has led the orchestra to excellence over 18 years. His more than 80 recordings with the Seattle Symphony, especially emphasizing seldom-heard American composers of romantic temperament, have built his reputation, and Seattle's, around the world. Fortunately, our music director feels an admirable loyalty to our Emerald City—where he's proud to make his home, and his children attend local schools—and he has turned away the sort of absurdly inflated contracts that stole our local Seattle Mariners baseball stars Randy Johnson, Ken Griffey, Jr., and Alex Rodriguez.

But it's easy to see why Schwarz stays in Seattle. Last season I heard him lead his orchestra in an impassioned, rip-roaring, knock-your-socks-off performance of Mahler's diabolically difficult Sixth Symphony. In our elegant new concert hall, with its glass lobby overlooking the moonlit waters of Elliott Bay, the music growled, crackled, and erupted with immediate intimacy. In this sparkling sound environment, with a dedicated ensemble

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responding to a conductor it knows and reveres, one can hear performances that might be matched—but seldom topped—in New York, Berlin, London, or Vienna.

The happy situation of the Seattle Symphony reflects an often-overlooked strength of American high culture—its robust regional vitality. In France, nothing important happens outside Paris; in Britain, London is the only show worth catching. In Russia, Peter the Great injected new vigor into the national culture by developing St. Petersburg as a cultural rival to Moscow, but the failure of the Soviet Union ever to inject dynamism into its other capital cities (Tashkent? Kiev? Minsk? Vilnius?) helped seal the fate of its empire.

The United States, on the other hand, boasts three different world capitals—Washington, D.C. for government, Los Angeles for pop culture, and New York for money and the arts—plus many thriving regional capital cities that have developed their own cultural resources of often startling quality. Boston, of course, is the hub of New England, Chicago is the cultured colossus of the Great Lakes, Atlanta serves as a queen city of the South, Minneapolis lights the northern plains, San Francisco dazzles many in Northern California and Silicon Valley, and so forth. Numerous cities—Baltimore, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Nashville, Kansas City, Dallas, Detroit, and many more—offer dazzlingly rich and often underappreciated artistic resources.

When I moved to Seattle more than five years ago from glitzy L.A., my friends worried about my survival so far from “the center of the action.” In reality, our family has been invigorated by cultural offerings in every area—from galleries, to theatre, to ballet. The Seattle Opera recently mounted an ambitious, woodsy, nature-based interpretation of Wagner’s formidable Ring Cycle. Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist August Wilson makes his home in the Seattle area, as do popular novelists such as Tom Robbins, David Guterson, and Robert Ferrigno, renowned glassmaker Dale Chihuly (who created chandeliers for both the new concert hall and the new baseball stadium) and, until his recent death, the most celebrated of all black American painters, Jacob Lawrence. The Seattle International Film Festival offers a stunning array of events and draws the largest attendance of any film festival in the United States.

I expect that residents of other “second tier” creative centers throughout the United States could cite similar experiences, pointing to the exuberance of cultural offerings far from Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall. A few years ago, for instance, when *Time* attempted a solemn ranking of American orchestras, the magazine startled many casual observers by awarding the St. Louis Symphony second place—just behind the incomparable Chicago Symphony in first.

It’s more than prosperity that draws so many of the world’s best musicians and painters and performers of all kinds to the United States—it’s our decentralized strength which opens up so many opportunities. A similar phenomenon could be observed more than a century ago in Germany. From 1700 to 1900, Germany produced an astonishing array of creative giants, especially in music, in part, historians suggest, because of its numerous and lively regional centers. Before German unification in 1870 concentrated everything in Berlin, more than a hundred independent

duchies and principalities thrived in Central Europe—many with their own ambitious royal courts, fostering the arts. The small city of Mannheim boasted the greatest orchestra in Europe in the eighteenth century, because the Elector Palatine tried to burnish his own reputation by assembling the finest players. In the next century, Felix Mendelssohn helped to develop the Gewandhaus Orchestra in provincial Leipzig, while the “Mad King of Bavaria,” Ludwig II, lured Richard Wagner to his bumptious province by building him a custom-made opera house in remote Bayreuth. This multi-polar system helped nourish Bach and Telemann, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bruckner, Wagner, and many others.

From its earliest days, America has also benefited from the radical decentralization of cultural and intellectual life. The independent development of 13 distinctive colonies ensured that no one city would ever dominate continental life. At the time of the Revolution, Philadelphia was the largest and most civilized metropolis (and the second most populous English-speaking city on earth, after London). Yet Boston boasted more impressive political and theological leadership, in addition to the well-established 140-year-old (even then!) Harvard College. In the early nineteenth century, New York decisively eclipsed Philadelphia in cultural and financial leadership. Our federal system, however, guaranteed that we would never see all power and talent flowing to a single center, following the European trend.

The power of localism also helps explain a broader historical phenomenon keenly pertinent to the current world crisis: The surpassing of Islam by the West over the last millennium. In the year 1000, the Islamic world boasted a more culturally and scientifically advanced civilization than Christian Europe. Part of the strength of that civilization involved its vibrant regional centers. The two greatest cities on earth a thousand years ago were, arguably, Cordoba in Spain and Isfahan in Persia—two powerful centers at the opposite far edges of the Islamic Empire.

Unfortunately for its subsequent history, the Muslim world passed under the control of the Ottoman Turks who imposed a mighty centralizing force, drawing all energy to their capital in Istanbul. Meanwhile, European culture benefited from a riot of competitive nationalism and the emergence of dozens of great cities and cultural capitals. That vibrancy and competition, contrasted with the relatively static, imperial frame of mind that prevailed in Islam, conferred enormous and unmistakable advantages on the West.

Decentralized competition will continue to bring great benefits to America—cultural as well as economic and political—if we properly acknowledge the importance of local endeavors, and keep them flourishing. Seattle won’t seize the mantle of World Capital from New York any time soon, but we take great comfort in the fact that many of our home-grown institutions can hold their own with the big-leaguers. As life gradually returns to normal in Manhattan, New Yorkers may once again feel blasé about their Philharmonic and Broadway and great museums. But those of us enjoying burgeoning artistic resources all across America’s provinces will always maintain a special connection with regional arts institutions which enrich our lives and help etch our local identities.



# Are Movies Art?

A symposium featuring:

Jonah Goldberg

Chris Weinkopf

Brandon Bosworth

Cristopher Rapp

Jonathan Lant

Terry Teachout

## In Art, Popular is OK

By Jonah Goldberg

There are several problems with the “art vs. mere entertainment” debate. The first is the language itself. We don’t have a good middle-ground word that describes something that is both artful and fun for many people.

This linguistic hitch is exacerbated by a second problem. A certain elite holds a white-knuckled grip on the term “art,” and is reluctant to allow the grubby masses to touch it. This elite overlooks the fact that much high art used to be popular entertainment.

Take cathedrals, the only form of classical art I know much about. The stained glass and stone carvings of medieval cathedrals were intended to tell very specific stories and convey very specific messages to bored and illiterate lay people. They were spectacles that aimed to wow and attract. Yet no one would hesitate today to call the North Rose window of Notre Dame de Paris “art.” If the Catholic Church had had access to a Super 8 camera circa 1200, there’s little doubt in my mind that Bishop Sully would have been out there with a light meter around his neck shooting movies instead of carving gargoyles.

Sculptors use clay to make art. Masonry supply houses use it to make bricks. Likewise you can make art out of celluloid or you can make junk. *American Pie 2* is not art, but *Breaker Morant* may be. The medium must be separated from the message.

The real problem is those damned elites. Both liberal and conservative, they’ve constructed a bizarre algebraic equation which finds the amount of “artfulness” to be inversely proportional to the supply and demand. The logic seems to be that if Rodin had allowed thousands of copies to be cast of the “Burghers of Calais” (an easy task given that he had a mold), the volume of statues would have diluted the artfulness in some way.

A similar bias comes into play with film. The more restricted the showing and the smaller the audience, the more likely the pointy heads will be to call it art. But release something in a thousand shopping malls and, regardless of content, it is no longer worthy.

There is merit to the idea that an audience should have to work a little bit to appreciate the finer things. But what the art priesthood has forgotten is that art can be popular, and fun, too.

TAE contributing writer Jonah Goldberg writes our BEAT THE PRESS.

## It’s Just Entertainment (And That’s Enough)

By Chris Weinkopf

Artistry in film, as far as I’m concerned, extends about as far as good pyrotechnics. Of course, the *Star Wars* trilogy, *Die Hard*, and *Terminator 2* are my favorite movies. Maybe I’m too immature to appreciate artistic film. Or maybe I’m just enjoying what cinema does best.

The pretensions of some filmmakers and film schools notwithstanding, movies are ultimately TV writ large, and no serious person would argue that the idiot box is any place for high culture. Real art is, by its nature, abstract—the painter’s conception of a moment in time; the composer’s gift for translating images and emotions into symphonies; the writer’s struggle to put a three-dimensional, full-color world onto a two-dimensional, black-and-white page.

But film leaves little room for abstraction—unless it’s forced, and nothing makes for worse art than forced abstraction. This makes film a lousy art form by definition. But it also makes it a