

ing the floodgates to anyone who can find a white ancestor who was an indentured servant during the 17th or 18th centuries.

To decide who deserves reparations, the government will have to accept the logical consequence of a generation of affirmative-action policy and acknowledge the official, statutory establishment of a federal system of racial classification, preferably under a board with Cabinet-rank status. Classification would be a simple matter, as genetic science is now sufficiently advanced to decide the predominant racial identity or geographical origin of any person. Perhaps this genetic identification could be coded into a modified Social Security number or federal identification card.

While there would be ongoing controversy over people of half- or quarter-descent, the government would otherwise have a rock-solid basis on which to form future policies, not just in allocating reparations, but in shaping education and welfare policies, designing electoral districts, and so on. For example, we would know exactly which people living on the Hawaiian islands are entitled to shares in the multibillion dollar reparations to be paid by the United States for overthrowing the native monarchy back in the 1890's; or which self-described "Indians" could legitimately claim some of the wealth pouring in from the casino boom on reservations. American politics could move smoothly toward the kind of efficient classification proposed under the Nuremberg race laws and debated in such celebrated historical documents as the proceedings of the Wannsee conference. (But what about Jews of "three-quarter descent"? How about "half-Jews," *mischlings*?)

I wish I were joking about some of these trends, but I'm not. For the Indian example, see Jeff Benedict's book *Without Reservation* (HarperCollins, 2000), a shocking study of how the federal government decided that an ill-assorted bunch of Connecticut families suddenly declaring themselves to be "Mashantucket Pequot Indians" was in fact a lost tribe, entitled to all the rights and privileges that come with tribal status—including permission to build and run the Foxwoods casino, currently one of the biggest money-makers in the hemisphere. Like African-American reparations, the Indian and Hawaiian cases represent the growing tendency to award rights on the basis of descent and genetics, an idea that is

unconstitutional, immoral, and (does anyone remember the word?) un-American.

A reparations bill would open wide the doors to all manner of subsequent claims, to the extent that our emerging system of race law would be driven to the point of collapse, which is where it belongs. Without race law, we might have to learn to live in a colorblind society, where everyone, regardless of genetic makeup, is regarded as equally entitled to certain basic rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It sounds radical, but it just might work.

As an added bonus, a reparations debate might limit the endless spiral of guilt and apology. Paying Japanese-Americans for internment during World War II might, arguably, have been justified, but look where we have gone since then. Connoisseurs of political eccentricity found a rare treasure in a report issued this past July by a special international panel formed by the Organization of African Unity to examine the genocide in Rwanda, where members of the Hutu tribe massacred several hundred thousand rival Tutsis. The panel demanded payment of a "significant level of reparations" by the United States and France, on the grounds that they had failed to prevent the tragedy. In the words of the Canadian spokesman, only such gigabucks could possibly purge "an almost incomprehensible scar of shame on American foreign policy." In other words, the United States should pay for doing nothing in a situation it had nothing to do with. Is the syntax of that last sentence any more bizarre than the idea it expresses?

Extending this principle, we could see a good deal of money changing hands internationally in the future: money paid by Canada, say, to apologize for not preventing the Chinese conquest of Tibet; by France, for its failure to save Atlanta from Sherman; and several trillion dollars worth of amnesty payments from the Arab world to the African regions from which it raided slaves for over half a millennium. (Which raises an interesting question: When I note black faces in the United States or the Caribbean, I can see the living descendants of the Atlantic slave trade, but where is the comparable black population in the Near East? Just how many of the Arabs' millions of slaves survived to bear children?)

In short, a reparations debate would immensely benefit the United States by

raising countless delicate questions which need to be explored. We know that people believe this outrageous nonsense: Let's force them to say these things out loud. A reparations measure would almost certainly stir a general reaction that would have positive effects. And if it didn't—if the political elite were allowed to get away with this atrocity, with no more than token protests—that would at least prove, once and for all, that American democracy is too far gone to be worth saving. It would be nice to know once and for all.

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ART

The Case for Anonymous Art

by Peter Laurie

For all of living memory, they have been making this wilderness and calling it art. If you were there in Paris, as I was, for the public sale of the Picasso legacy belonging to the artist's mistress and model Dora Maar, you would know whereof I speak.

The masterpiece of this collection, *Weeping Woman*, probably the most repulsive work in portraiture up to its time (though successfully emulated since), inspired an hysteria of greed. Both the painting and its sale must rank as high-water marks in the incarnation of the hideous, the ongoing search for an ideal ugliness to characterize our time.

In this painting, Picasso has outdone himself, insulting his subject, the art of portraiture, all the artistic ideals of the West, and life itself. And it is not well painted. Which is to say one would be hard put to imagine paint laid to canvas in some less painterly way. That he made myriads of such paragons of anticraftsmanship can only imply that (beyond his contempt for his patrons) Picasso loathed himself.

There is a term for this state of soul, *taedium vitae*, for which our word "tedium" would seem too neutral. What it really means is that one abominates life.

Many must have this affliction, since paintings radiant with the beauty of the artist and the model, pieces that prove Picasso could really paint if he wanted to, went for little money.

At the same time as the Paris sale, an American gallery mounted a retrospective of Jackson Pollock, whose fanfare one might have recited by heart: O that courageous, refreshingly nose-thumbing iconoclast! O so uniquely American originality! To have come up with a way of painting that annihilated it!

The inevitable product of an age obsessed with absolutes of individuality, Pollock confessed to having run his method into the ground before his off-hand end, although many a tarmac splatted with pigeon droppings, and many a drop cloth besmirched, has taken on new meaning since. Meanwhile, two of Picasso's most formidable contemporaries, creators of modernism's defining works in music and poetry, have entered what one hopes is a temporary eclipse. (The hope is for humanity, the artists themselves being well out of it.) Igor Stravinsky and T.S. Eliot, after giving birth to monsters of provocation, reconsidered, and thought better of it. Their works, hardly ever considered together, are intimately interrelated. "The Waste Land," opening as it does with the now familiar dirge upon April's cruelty (which is assumed to parody the opening of *Canterbury Tales*), pays explicit homage to *The Rite of Spring*. Eliot had attended the London debut, risen to his feet in an audience nonplussed, and cheered.

Although they did not befriend one another until old age, both worked at different times in artistic seclusion on the same stretch of the Lake Geneva shoreline. The two works inspired almost identical public reactions, inciting a notoriety that amounted to scandal—in Stravinsky's case it was an actual riot—that soon gave both of them reputations exceeding their art. But there was also a prolonged crisis for the artists themselves, both of whom split off into shards of miserable modernism before embracing Christianity. Their conversions were regarded with an unease that equaled the original outcry. At the same time, both the poet and the composer were returning philosophically to the classical traditions of their arts, laboring doggedly to produce work to rival any in the realm of ideal beauty.

In a conjunction, unheralded and unpremeditated (as of stars), each in the

course of 1930 unveiled another watershed masterwork—of spiritual surrender, this time—attuned to the public mood ensuing upon the Great Crash. Stravinsky's *A Symphony of Psalms* even shares a biblical text with Eliot's "Ash Wednesday." The *Exaudi supplicationem meam* with which the one begins and the "and let my prayer come unto Thee" with which the other ends, are the first and last lines of the same psalm.

This could only have been what it was taken for: a slap in the face of modernism, modernity, skepticism and all its works, though in each case, the despair was real. Their works also represented a revolt against the cult of personality that had rendered both of them so public, a cult adhered to by modernists of a wider sphere, including Stalin and Hitler, who presented themselves as saviors of mankind. Stravinsky and Eliot were denounced: Not only were they bourgeois decadents, they had failed to fulfill the promise of their apocalypses.

What, one wonders, was anyone imagining might be the sequel to a virgin's blood sacrifice or to the collapse of civilized consciousness with corpses in the street, other than what actually *did* happen during the 20th century? For some three centuries now, thoughtful minds (not usually those of artists) have been witness, Cassandra-like, to the coming war of all against all, although droves of sophists have humored us into paying no heed. Still, the big thing proceeds, chaotic and futilistic, to descend upon us.

But to take responsibility for the prophetic role that artists of the last century only dreamt of (and that several of ours have actually performed) is to embody something beyond mere personality and to move into the perennial, the catholic, the cosmic, the anonymously human. It requires us to defy the current axiom—that publicity is the only reality, a reality we must survive by living for things beyond ourselves and for others besides ourselves. Stravinsky and Eliot, as long as they lived, enjoyed uncommonly widespread, uncommonly perceptive, uncommonly devoted approbation, having voiced the unvoiced aspirations of a host of anonymous souls by becoming, themselves, anonymous souls.

Now, they must seem remote, as publicity's reality proclaims some poor soul the Hemingway of a new lost generation. I thread through a Paris whose bistros bulge with the new lost generation drink-

ing alone in crowds, museums trafficked as the Metro, barren of Hemingway or other vestiges of former glories. I learn that "He" is dead. I learn that "He" was nothing but the creature of his editor whose vampire's knack transformed its victim's drivel into a cynical (if sleekly crafted) trash, truly expressive of its time.

And who is to blame? Audiences eagerly devour the hoax of personal celebrity, while would-be artists who have already thrown away their souls line up around the block to try to sell them again for sums that purchase barely a fleeting illusion of having lived. There can be no question of actual art in such a world.

As the Battle of Britain loomed, Eliot closed his magazine, *The Criterion*, by sounding a somber note from the Dark Ages. There would be, he predicted, no more organized culture for the foreseeable future. In spite of the Allied victory, by the 1960's, there was none. Meanwhile, the counterculture resembled culture as a black hole resembles a solar system. An aged Picasso appeared in *Life* on the pot. He conceded that he was not a great painter: "Raffaello, Velasquez, Vermeer, they were. I am only a public entertainer." Stravinsky, his end impending, offered some last advice to composers of the future: "Make a million. Only if it comes easy. Otherwise, head underground."

In a previous darkening time, as Rome succumbed, as the bishop of Hippo turned his mind to eternal things, the citizens of the city went underground, sequestering what remained of civility, literacy, the arts, within an anonymity of innovation, the manor monastery, consecrated to the renewal of the world by fostering the soul out of the soil. In time, Cassiodorus and Benedict carried their point. They renewed the world.

I rest my case.

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M O V I N G ?

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In The Dark

by George McCartney

Making Choices, Taking Chances

Ever since Blaise Pascal made his wager on the infinite, it seems the French have been gridlocked at the intersection of chance and choice. In a universe of incalculable odds, how should a person place his bet? In his artful—but never artsy—film, *The Girl on the Bridge*, director Patrice Leconte takes up Pascal's challenge and, without abandoning its metaphysics, gives it a decidedly this-worldly turn. The result is an existential romantic comedy in the Gallic mode. If this sounds deep dish, remember that depth makes the soufflé rise.

The film's recipe begins with its surreal opening scene. We meet Adele, played by Vanessa Paradis, looking as grave as she is lovely. She is being interviewed or, perhaps, deposed by an unseen woman as a gallery of middle-aged men look on. It seems she's giving a personal accounting to an anonymous officialdom, a sort of apologia to the world at large. Assuming life only begins when you start making love, she explains that she left home as soon as she could find a boy to live with. But things haven't worked out as she had supposed. Her boyfriend didn't stay around very long, and his successors have proven equally faithless. "I get comed every day of my life," Adele complains bitterly. "Hands are tricky," she elaborates. "They can make you believe anything." Having passed through so many, she knows whereof she speaks. Her realization, however, hasn't helped her: "Boys attract me like clothes. I always want to try them on." Conceding the folly of her promiscuity, she blames herself more than the perfidious parade of men who have trampled on her sexual generosity. "I am like a vacuum; I pick up all the dirt around."

So, we are not entirely surprised when in the next scene, Adele decides (at the advanced age of 21) to throw herself into the Seine. As she stands on the bridge hesitating, Gabor, a middle-aged carnival knife-thrower, comes along by chance—or is it fate? (This is Daniel Auteuil playing with utter conviction a man who is somehow both heroically intense and

The Girl on the Bridge (*La Fille sur le pont*)

*Produced by Films Christian Fechner and
France 2 Cinéma*

Directed by Patrice Leconte
Screenplay by Serge Frydman
Released by Paramount Pictures

Saving Grace

*Produced by Homerun Productions and
Portman Entertainment Group*

Distributed by Fine Line Features
Directed by Nigel Cole
*Screenplay by Mark Crowdy
and Craig Ferguson*

Steal This Movie!

*Produced by Ardent Films
and Greenlight Productions*
Directed by Robert Greenwald
*Screenplay based on books by
Anita and Abbie Hoffman*
Distributed by Lions Gate Films Inc.

comically distracted, a Pascalian with one eye on the moment and the other on eternity.) "You seem to be about to make a mistake," Gabor remarks, seemingly unimpressed by her desperation. Adele tries to dismiss his interruption but cannot help being intrigued by his nonchalance. It's only when she plunges into the water—or does she fall?—that Gabor drops his pose and rushes to her rescue.

Once he's fished her out, he makes a proposition. He's looking for a new assistant. She could be the new target in his knife act. After all, given her present state of mind, she really hasn't much to lose. Besides he has recruited many of his assistants from bridges such as this. "Burned out women are my specialty," he explains with a shrug. Needless to say, Adele is hooked. She surrenders herself to his hands and finds they're quite unlike those she's become used to. Rather than being tricky, they're deft, assured, and, above all, respectful as he whisks her from dress shop to shoe store to beauty parlor, preparing her for her new role. The soundtrack booms with Benny Goodman's 1938 Carnegie Hall record-

ing of "Sing, Sing, Sing" celebrating the pure romantic inventiveness of this episode in which she winsomely collaborates with his masculine decisiveness.

As they proceed to their first engagement in Monte Carlo, Gabor informs Adele that their relationship will be chaste: His personal code does not permit him to sleep with his assistants. Like a doctor, he must not compromise his skill and her safety. At this point, a physical relationship would affect his judgment. Nevertheless, they soon achieve an intimacy of another sort. As he explains to her, a knife-thrower cannot succeed unless his target inspires him. Adele is nothing if not inspiring. As she stands against the corkboard at which he hurls his knives, she gasps and sighs with almost erotic abandon as each one safely hits its mark just beyond her flesh. She comes through each performance unscathed, except for the odd nick that he tenderly bandages. Leconte's conceit is so bald, it's astonishing. He merely un-masks the sexual metaphor everyone senses in knife-throwing acts. This is courtship distilled to its essentials: step by step, feminine permission transfigures masculine desire, which is skillfully disciplined by respect and affection. By today's standards, such traditionalism is positively daring.

The film's velvety black-and-white photography is strikingly appropriate to the knife-throwing sequences. They are shot in tight, alternating close-ups of the couple's faces. Paradis's features are rendered in a hazy luminescence that brings out their soft, rounded youthfulness. Auteuil's craggy face is split vertically like the half moon, deep shadow on one side and blinding light on the other, emphasizing his hollowed eyes, sagging cheeks, and beaked nose. Their allegorical roles are literally illuminated: Leconte is meditating on the seemingly irreconcilable poles of immature desire and adult restraint. Where she is haplessly headlong, he is honorably headstrong. Their relationship will be the fulcrum on which these elemental contradictions either balance or founder. For, as we discover, they are extremes in need of one another.

Unlike Adele, Gabor is never tempted to drift. His focused existentialism won't