



Seeing the Critics as Critical

By Norman Lear

Arts Critics Group Conference

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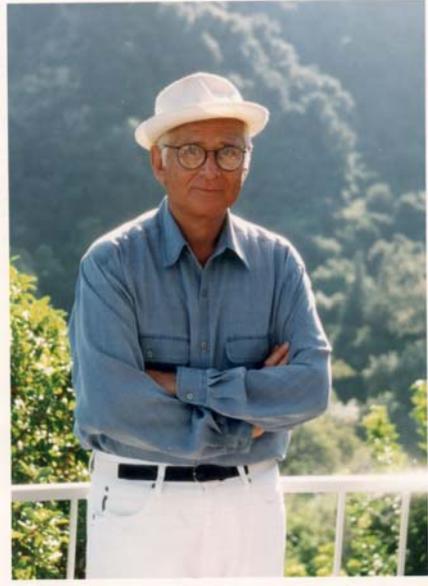
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The Norman Lear

CENTERTAINMENT

Exploring Implications of the Convergence of Entertainment, Commerce, and Society



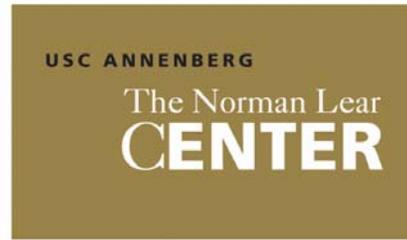
Norman Lear

Norman Lear has enjoyed a long career in television and film, and as a political and social activist and philanthropist.

Known as the creator of Archie Bunker and All in the Family, Lear's television credits include "Sanford & Son"; "Maude"; "Good Times"; "The Jeffersons"; "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman"; "Fernwood 2Nite" and the dramatic series "Palmerstown U.S.A." His motion picture credits include "Cold Turkey," "Divorce American Style," "Fried Green Tomatoes," "Stand By Me" and "The Princess Bride." In 1982, he produced the two-hour special, "I Love Liberty," for ABC.

Beyond the entertainment world, Mr. Lear has brought his distinctive vision to politics, academia and business by founding several nonprofit organizations including People For the American Way (1980-present); the Norman Lear Center at the USC Annenberg School for Communication (2000-present), a multidisciplinary research and public policy center dedicated to exploring the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society; and the Business Enterprise Trust (1989-2000), an educational program that used annual awards, business school case studies and videos to cast a spotlight on exemplary social innovations in American business.

He is currently chairman of Act III Communications, a multimedia holding with interests in the recording, motion picture, broadcasting and publishing industries.



The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

Seeing the Critics as Critical

Norman Lear

My lifelong belief that in every human situation there is a touch of the ridiculous is not in the least diminished by my appearance here today. Ostensibly, you invited me here to share my insights about the power of art criticism to transform the world – which begs the question: Why you, a formidable group of intellectuals, would ask this of me. I made my reputation, after all, as a writer-producer, of prime-time television entertainment – the stuff between the ads for two-hour Viagra and 36-hour Cialis – the man who brought you Archie Bunker, George Jefferson, Fred Sanford and Mary Hartman, arguably four of the least intellectual characters ever to be seen on television. But you did it and you'll have to make the best of it.



“Listen, if that’s what they want to do, who am I to say?”



I wasn’t always that self-deprecating. When I was a kid, my mother did it for me. If she were alive today, and I called to tell her that I was speaking before hundreds of critics of music, dance, television, film, etc., I’m certain that her response would be just what it was when I phoned her one morning many years ago to tell her that the Television Academy of Arts and Sciences had just notified me that they were going to start a Television Hall of Fame and that I was to be among the first inductees – I, along with Edward R. Murrow, Paddy Chayefsky, Milton Berle and Lucille Ball. “Listen,” she said, “If that’s what they want to do, who am I to say?”

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The cultural influence of American critics may be at its lowest ebb in a generation.

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It figures that this first-time convention of the Arts Critics Group was sparked by the collaboration of the Annenberg School for Communication and the Getty Program on Arts and Journalism, two of the most innovative, forward-thinking institutions in the West. I am flattered that they asked me here, and it excites me to see that arts journalism and criticism are receiving such attention. I think it's fair to say that those of us who suffer your criticism for what we write and produce often start out selfishly thinking of critics more as publicists – with the annoying habit of having independent judgment.

But it was your independent judgment that helped the giant collaboration I headed in the 70s to move out of itself and view what we were up to as just one small integrated part of the culture at large. We learned to take the most nourishment from critics when they didn't just review, but dared to grapple with the meaning of our work – or of a book or film or piece of music – to the larger culture. We saw that you are at your best when you're informing readers what artistic works say about our cultural values and identities – essentially, about who we are as humans.

It is with some alarm, therefore, that I read in a thoughtful article by Scott Timberg in Sunday's *Los Angeles Times*, that the cultural influence of American critics may be at its lowest ebb in a generation. Serious criticism, Timberg suggests, seems to be disappearing from the nation's newspapers, magazines and television, and what remains is often bland, homogenous and promotional in nature. One arts editor lamented the "Zagat-ization" of criticism, after the Zagat restaurant guides of consumer ratings.

Timberg identifies a number of possible reasons for the eclipse of criticism: the competing voices of the Internet, particularly blogging; the competitive pressures of a multi-media marketplace to “dumb down” criticism in order to reach the broadest possible audience; a populist, anti-intellectual hostility to high art and anything that smacks of “elitism”; and the American compulsion to celebrate blockbuster success, no matter how awful its actual quality.



The human impulse that animates criticism is as elemental and necessary as the one that animates art itself.



All of these things may be true, and they certainly deserve to be explored. But to infer that arts criticism is therefore dead or dying, is missing the point. Criticism – like any basic art form – ebbs and flows, waxes and wanes, with changes in the times, the specific art form, and the rise of new media technologies.

When television arrived on the scene in the 1950s, there was a lot of hand-wringing that the movies were as good as dead. Just before “All in the Family” was introduced, and again today, people are fretting that the sitcom is dead. And I will never forget when *Time* magazine asked in an April 1966 cover story, “Is God Dead?” If so, He sure has mounted one helluva comeback.

The precise style and form of arts criticism have changed a lot over the past 20 years, and will surely change more in the future. But I have every confidence that arts criticism will survive whatever adversity it is currently facing – because the human impulse that animates criticism is as elemental and necessary as the one that animates art itself.

For me, the real question is not the survival of arts criticism, but its moral passion and integrity. Can it speak to contemporary politics and culture in a clear, compelling and authentic voice?

I have been looking forward to this event today – especially since reading the *LA Times* article – because I have wanted to emphasize something I trust you know but bears repeating: Contemporary politics and culture need you. They need to hear from probing, intelligent minds that provide a moral gyroscope for our wildly confused culture, and are willing to speak truth to power.

Art, as you also know, can be dangerous to those in power. As it reveals and comments on our world, it tends to raise embarrassing questions in very compelling ways. It questions the Official Version of life told by politicians, and hands us instead the “Ground Truth,” as they say in the military: the irreducible facts and the subjective experiences of real human beings. By refusing to be inauthentic, great art helps us understand ourselves and our culture. And with the help of the critic, we recover a sense of emotional and moral complexity in human affairs.

This, I submit, is precisely what so many cultural conservatives are fearful of. To them, the idea that a work of art may have multiple meanings or, heaven forefend, contradictory interpretations, is moral relativism – and we know what kind of a slippery slope that is! No sooner do you admit that there might be two sides to a story, or shades of gray, or historical complexities, and you’ll wake up as a secular humanist and start condoning condoms, or promoting the theory of evolution, or civil rights for gays and lesbians – or, bit your tongue, Norman – you might even toy with the notion of defending the separation of church and state.

Politics, of course, is all about collapsing human complexities into simple-minded stories and sound bites – “messages” highly crafted in manipulative ways to mobilize as large a base as possible for political ends.

The Official Version in politics, where power resides, tends to be simple and comforting and self-evident. Life, of course, is almost exactly the opposite. The best films and music and dance and art

recognize that life is messy, inconsistent and complicated – and they strive to depict that messiness in all of its beautiful, evocative ambiguity.

So there tends to be an abiding tension between power and art. Power aims to anesthetize and retain. Art aims to probe and startle. But what happens when the art of a given period fails to do this – when artists pull their punches, pander to their audiences, sell out to the power of commercial interests, and fail to take risks by expressing their real feelings?



You are our visionary guides.



This is where you critics come in; it is the reason you are so vital, no matter how media technologies and businesses evolve. You are there to give us some perspective on how truthfully and skillfully creative works are speaking to power, and to point out when they are not. You are our visionary guides. The great critic is to an artist as the great psychotherapist is to a patient or the great editor is to a writer. You have the insight to see the artist's best potential and the talent to help elicit it. The big difference, of course, is that the advice is not privately conveyed, but broadcast to the general public. You are, in effect, the host of an ongoing conversation between art and the political and social culture of the moment. It's a conversation, I might add, that is not as alive and well in today's world as one might wish.

In the wake of 9/11, the United States government has become far more secretive, authoritarian and fear-inducing – and the American culture has become far more volatile, polarized and fearful. The disturbing truth-telling of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial or even the early Eminem – artistic entities that force us to pay more attention to those who suffer and to reconsider what we have taken for granted – are too much the exception. More

than ever we need the wisdom that only art and art criticism can provide. More than ever we need its insistent humanity and its power.

What power? At the United Nations, when the United States came to make the case for the Iraq War, the Bush administration literally could not face up to the power of a painting that depicted the monstrous death and horror that occurred when the Germans bombed a tiny Basque village – and so the government of the most powerful country in the world had a blue drape placed over Picasso’s *Guernica*, one of the great works of art of the 20th Century. Talk about the power to disturb and startle!

Not to be out-done, a little while later, then-Attorney General John Ashcroft demanded that the bare breasts of a statue of “Lady Liberty” be covered lest they send the wrong message. This is, in fact, the core problem with the aesthetics of power. All art must be politically correct. It must either support the prevailing political mood or serve as a kind of aesthetic decoration, a pleasant amusement. The banality, mediocrity and trivialization of culture are directly linked, I believe, to the degree of political correctness that is current.

The poet Allen Ginsberg used to rail against the “emotional fascism” of television and other media. He was convinced that his poetry could stave off cultural insanity – or as Robert Frost put it more modestly, poetry can serve as “a stay against confusion.” In the 1980s, one tactic that Ginsberg used to speak truth to power was to imagine Ronald Reagan as a homosexual. It was an idea too outrageous for respectable opinion to entertain – and so it naturally broke through the bullshit. It was Ginsberg’s way of defying power – and rehumanizing it.

If the unexpurgated use of b.s. seems to have come from left field this morning, it may be a lot more mainstream than some are prepared to admit a) because the number eight book on the *New York Times* Bestseller List this week is Princeton professor Harry Frankfurt’s new book, *On Bullshit*, and b) because it should be no secret that our country is awash in bullshit.

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A culture that routinely traffics in b.s. is not simply a stranger to the truth; it doesn't care about the truth.

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What do we mean by bullshit? When he used the word, Ginsberg felt that he was debunking lies, and so he was. But we have come to a far more perilous juncture today. Lies can be refuted, but a culture that routinely traffics in b.s. is not simply a stranger to the truth. It doesn't *care* about the truth. Its only concern is the artful approximation of the truth. As Professor Frankfurt writes:

The realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept.

And as the philosopher Jonathan Lear, reviewing *On Bullshit*, postulates:

"Bullshit artistry depends on our complicity. In its own way, it is a demonstration of power. The bullshit artist says, 'This is bullshit, but you will accept it anyway. And even as you accept it as bullshit, you will honor it anyway.'"

And of course, we do – even as we know in our hearts that Nielsen ratings, sweeps weeks, SAT scores, bottled water, sugar-free, low-carb, no child left behind, compassionate conservatism, "Who's a liberal? I'm a progressive" are all just so much bullshit, and that real truth, beauty and achievement lie elsewhere. But there we go again and again, genuflecting before these false idols in spite of ourselves.

– bullshit.

One reason that so many people have embraced the Internet is because it's seen as a new tool for challenging all the b.s. in our culture. That's the appeal of blogging, after all – to bypass the mass media and provide a more direct and authentic form of communication. The Internet is also

spawning lots of “recommender engines” – software systems that compile the opinions of huge numbers of people so we can see what everyone else is buying or thinks is worthwhile.

All of these innovations are interesting, but they are no substitute for the personal insight, leadership and literary talent of a great critic. No matter what the medium, we will always need art that is willing to take risks for expressing a personal vision and critics willing to do the same.

If anyone is going to help us re-establish a relationship to truth, and to do so in a way that carries moral authority, it will be artists and those who are receptive to their work. Artists inherently know how to diagnose the culture. They know how to listen to the Other and speak to the heart. Artists know how to cut through the ideological foghorns and b.s. illuminating piercing human truths. They know how to express the common human feelings that we all share, whether we live in a red or a blue State.

But artists can only flourish and grow if they can find and interact with appreciative audiences. They must be discovered – and acquire a following. They must be understood for who they are. As critics, you can help this happen. You are the artist’s closest ally, their conduit to reach the larger, indifferent and scattered culture. You are also an interpreter, guide and judge. You can focus our attention as readers and theater-goers, as dance and music lovers. You can help identify and showcase the art that can dispel the bullshit that afflicts our culture. You can help reinvigorate the moral passion that we so desperately need to experience.

You can help us understand the spirit of our times better. Help us understand why the “reality shows” are so deeply appealing to audiences today. Instead of fixating on the nasty words in hip-hop, tell us why hip-hop is said to be the biggest musical genre of our time, and not just here, but around the globe.

Let’s talk about how marketing is dictating artistic choices often driving the real b.s. artists out of the mainstream. Tell me: Where are those talented young people going? Why is the Internet becoming the new home for the most exciting artists?

Artistic works – of whatever medium – are the most important forms of expression that we humans possess. It's the way that we survive. It's how we declare our individuality while affirming that we all belong to a larger family of man. That will never change: only the technology of expression and delivery will.

As you confront the next dance performance or sculpture exhibit or gallery showing or journalism review, that is what you must help us remember. I recently encountered a brief paragraph by Albert Einstein that says this more eloquently than I have over the past 15 minutes. It goes:

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us, "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Freeing ourselves by widening our circle of compassion – and, I would add, understanding – lie at the heart of any successful art. And so, the best thing that you can do, as critics, is to celebrate this achievement wherever you find it. We have so much ground to regain in helping the human heart be heard through the bullshit. You have an indispensable role to play.