

The Disarmament of the Bored

Hank Malone

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I.

If we are truly hungry we will eat anything, anywhere. In Aushwitz, philosophers killed each other for the bones in the gravel-pits. They ate the soup made of their brothers' bodies.

If we are only moderately hungry we are rich. More than half the world's population knows no other feeling but hunger. They spend their time searching for food, as we in America spend our time searching for the Apocalypse.

As white Americans we know little about material affluence. We are sated and bored with it. Our leisure is a freedom from work and hunger. But work and hunger have been our traditional sources of livelihood, for without them we have been unable to call ourselves truly human. Poverty had given us life, but affluence has destroyed that "something" in us.

In the large cities we have begun to make a cult of worshipping poverty. Poverty has become the official sign of life. Reluctant, however, to swallow the whole pill, we have settled for the Art of Poverty: the folk-arts. We have settled for something far less than the authentic struggles of those who are genuinely hungry.

With sated appetites we search for work. There is no work to be found. And so the only alternatives are those which allow us to rub shoulders with those who are, in fact, hungry, and do, in fact, work.

II.

Art is perhaps the most interesting product of a civilization, the most appealing, the most enduring, and for the bored the most distracting. It is natural that art should appeal to those of us who are interested in escaping the tedium, but there are two kinds of tedium. Art attracts two kinds of people—the sensitive, who reject the tedium of conventional work, and the bored, who have none.

They tend to meet each other at the spearhead of every civilization. Those of us who are bored hate the sensitive. Those of us who are sensitive hate the bored and yet we have met each other in every gallery of art since the dawn of time.

III.

The sated appetite for life we may call the Apocalyptic Hunger. This is the hunger of the connoisseur. It has nothing to do with food. It has nothing to do with the taste for life itself, but represents the frustrated longings of affluence. It is the agonizing sound and shape of rich men searching for work. The desperation of diletantism.

The folk-arts have given to the bored what the great arts have given to the sensitive; namely, vivid moorings in a life dominated by tedious activities. One might use this distinction profitably. Nothing is more indicative about

the current taste for folk-art, for instance, than the virtually exclusive aura that excludes with an iron hand the invasion of the traditional classical arts.

I am suggesting that the popularity of folk-art reflects an Apocalyptic Hunger for life, we search for vitality in a world without work: Folk-art as a longing for real work. Such a taste is self-defeating.

Ultimately the bored find nothing in the folk-arts because they have not taken the full dose. The full dose would be real hunger. Poverty, we must not forget, is its own best friend. Art is a joy that demands we share in the misery and plight of its production. The folk-arts require nothing short of our own downfall.

IV.

It is easy to see why the bored scurry around so much. They have neither the diligence to attach themselves to the real values of art, nor the capacity of sharing the plights of those “folk who must endure conventional work. The bored are caught between Heaven and Hell. They are caught in the flurry of winds that howl between the stars.

Dilettante hunger is psychic. It no more reflects the real appetites of a human being than does a voyeur reflect a supercharged sexuality. The bored have become alien to the world of their senses. They could no more find a satisfactory outlet for their longings than a turtle could find a home for its eggs on a slab of concrete.

V.

Opposing the sensitive, the bored run along the abscissa of art, constantly escaping the self-defeating situation in which they find their lives. The bored live for “ticks,” for veneer surfaces, as objects to be acted upon, to be “kicked” in other words. Among the bored there is no vertical movement. Nothing soars upward. No commitments are made. There is no existentialism among the bored.

Instead, they cultivate the wings of Mercury. They run in a fast pack, as a coterie. Every experience to them is “great” because every experience is qualitatively the same; a veneer, a “kick.” There is no experience of depth, and so depth becomes meaningless. Every “kick” is “great.” Every experience is reduced to the solid black line that pours out onto the electroencephalogram of a corpse.

Death becomes “great.”

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