

Humanitas Awards, Writers Guild of America, West

There is something vaguely unsettling about paying artists to improve the moral state of our society. I was brought up to view the artist as someone above money, beyond the stage, and devoted to an exalted existence that set the artist against established values: the artist, especially the writer, was the spirit of rebellion, the spearhead of the future, and his attitude was essentially moralistic. In an increasingly secular age the artist's voice augmented and replaced the voice of the Church in showing the way. Here, within the framework of the commercial we have artists being paid for expressing the Spirit of God and affirming spiritual values. It is a little like getting man to do God's work. So be it.

It is in a grand tradition of popes hiring Michelangelo to paint the ceiling, and while he's cheering the old place up, celebrating the creation of the world. Nothing wrong with that. I suppose what is really sad about our present state of affairs is that Humanitas is such a rarity and novelty: that the overwhelming tide of money poured out upon writers in Television is paid to sell soap and deodorant, to sell a vision of life untroubled by thought or pain or compassion except in the most sentimentalized fashion. This is rather new in history. The artist has always tended to be an outsider in fact as well as vision. Television has succeeded in subsidizing the body of writers who write most of the shows far out of the traditional Garrett Well into the top levels of the middle class.

I would not insult my fellow writers by suggesting that in this process they are corrupted into expressing the view of the class they have joined. That is far too simplistic an idea of what happens. But I feel we tend to lose touch with our roots, and with those other parts of society who need our help, our insight, our influence (if not our control) of the most pervasive medium of communication mankind has ever possessed. This gargantuan mouth speaks only one voice: that of the advertiser. Through Humanitas another voice is added—for believers the Voice of God. For others of us, the voice of the spirit of the best of man, of man's aspirations for ourselves and our children.

This touches on the ambiguous nature of our business—or our art—which is it? Business, or art? It is both. To me a backlot was always a place of magic, full of rich memories of movies remembered, moments of recognition and feelings, part of a process of growing up into a thinking and feeling being. A couple of years ago I was present at a party on the backlot at Warners—Cagney's face hangs in the air as I think about it—a party given for booksellers. The President and two Vice Presidents of Warners were there, walking through the dust of their western street. On a hunch I asked the question and my hunch was right: none of the men who ran the company had ever been on the backlot. Weren't they curious? No. For them the world of movies and TV is business and the shootouts and drama and the slapstick and probably the sex scenes too are in their offices. I realized then the gulf that splits us, the creators whose creative lives exist on the soundstages and in our minds, from the businessmen who think in grosses. That isn't ambiguous at all. It is two separate worlds. The only time they meet is during negotiation of a contract. Then the spirit of competition—of winning and losing taxes over. Perhaps that's the solution: this is not at, not business either: it's a sport.

And so we come to the winners. It is mildly ironic that while the commercial awards—the Emmys—are symbolic, this award for the purely spiritual is solid money, and a lot of it.

That has its value beyond the prizes themselves: it attracts attention. It publicizes what these writers have done and written. It spreads the word. Perhaps in years to come these awards—this modest ceremony—can be celebrated more widely, be valued by millions in the same way the commercial awards are. In the spirit of Michelangelo painting the ceiling, celebrating the creation of the world.

One last thought: What I have said has been more for myself than for the Writer's Guild, a disclaimer I add because we are a Guild of rewriters and arguers. There are always a vocal bunch who would say "I wouldn't have said it that way." But I feel I can speak for us all when I extend the Guild's congratulations to all the nominees: and add there are no losers among you, only winners. Thank You.