# Western Culture, 2000 AD (or is it CE?)

**By** Guido Mina di Sospiro (January 2019)

*Good and Evil Angels Struggling for the Possession of a Child*, William Blake, (1793-94)

> *In the late 1990s I wrote* De Anima Mundi, *a collection of essays, contemplations and dream interpretations intended for my eyes only. Recently rereading it, I came across the following essay, written on the cusp of the new Millennium. It examined two films—the first a serial winner at sundry festivals; the second, immensely popular—and drew its conclusions. In retrospect, I suspect I detect some hope in it that things might change in the 21st century. Have they? Almost twenty years on, it is up to you, contemporary reader, to decide.*

**Prophets are the incarnation of** a dilemma. Their message is quintessentially esoteric, yet they are driven to make it exoteric. As all dilemmas, this cannot be solved, and the usual outcome is the immolation or downfall of the prophet, unless exceptional circumstances temporarily suspend this predicament. Moreover, that there should be the initiate (the prophet) and the uninitiate (the disciples), has become a rather indigestible concept.

Indeed, traditional values such as the teacher-disciple relationship, training, patience, methodicalness, and constancy, have been lost in the sacred and profane spheres alike. For example, in the figurative arts, think for a moment of Jackson Pollock, who based his life's work on trying to reproduce in paint the patterns made by his long-lost father urinating on stone. Such paintings, to which I used to refer, perhaps flatteringly, as "unappetizing spaghetti", are on display in many major museums the world over. Clearly, this is not the environment for Cimabue to say to his pupil Giotto, "You have surpassed your teacher."

And yet, a "prophetic" forum such as this, one that rethinks one's basic assumptions, feels the duty to promote and divulge esoteric ideas into the public domain. But, what is the state of  popular western culture in the year 2000?

Pedro Almodóvar's latest film, *All About My Mother*, is on a victory march. He has been awarded as the Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival; Best Movie of the Year of the

International Cinematographic Press Federation (Fipresci) at the Festival of San Sebastian (Spain); Best European Film and Best European Director at the 1999 European Film Awards; Time Magazine's Best Movie of the Year; the Golden Globe for the Best foreign Film; seven Goya Awards; the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, and the list goes on.

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Manuela, the story's heroine, leaving a performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* with her 17-year-old son, Esteban, watches in horror as he is killed by a car while chasing the play's star for an autograph. He had been begging his mother to tell him about the father he never knew, and keeping a journal entitled *All About My Mother* (the echo of *All About Eve* is deliberate). After Esteban's death, Manuela goes to Barcelona to find the boy's father, who now goes by the name of Lola. Transsexuals, a pregnant nun who works in a shelter for battered prostitutes, the *Streetcar* star's junkie lesbian lover—all have a role in Manuela's life. Eventually, we are asked to believe that the transsexual father of the late Esteban has impregnated the young nun, though one wonders at the attraction a nun would have for an ageing transsexual? Dutifully, the latter is afflicted by AIDS. In the end, the nun dies at childbirth, and Manuela mothers yet another son by . . . Lola.

Ernest Lehman, Alfred Hitchcock's favorite screenwriter, and my teacher in Los Angeles, taught me a golden rule in story-telling: "Never tell the audience something it already knows."

Yet, Almodóvar first shows us the unfortunate death of Esteban; then has Manuela recount this tragedy not once, but twice to other unknowing characters. Is the audience yawning? Yes and no. The intent is to jerk the audience's tears, to engender sympathy not so much for the son and mother, but for all characters involved. Almodóvar himself has stated: "There is no greater spectacle than watching a woman cry."

Consequently, we are made to commiserate a circus of painfully grotesque and implausible characters. This is the culture of the glorification of degradation, and of aimlessness. The film would seem to suggest, perhaps unwittingly, that the degree of freedom enjoyed by the characters is a burden of such magnitude, they simply cannot deal with it.

Twenty-five years ago, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, Or 120 Days Of Sodom* portrayed yet more degraded individuals. Some might remember the notorious scene in which a few characters are made to eat human feces. The intent was also, presumably, to shock the bourgeois, as the film was censored, sequestered, etc. Nowadays, the intelligentsia applauds, and lavishes awards to films that not only portray man at his most disoriented worst, but demand our sympathy, and praise.

This is the blind alley of exasperated existentialism, a bottomless pit. At his best, existentialist man, just and upright, is a sad priest without God, as exemplified by Dr. Rieux in Camus's *The Plague*