

# 1000 WORDS ABOUT VALUES AND CULTURE

May 2005

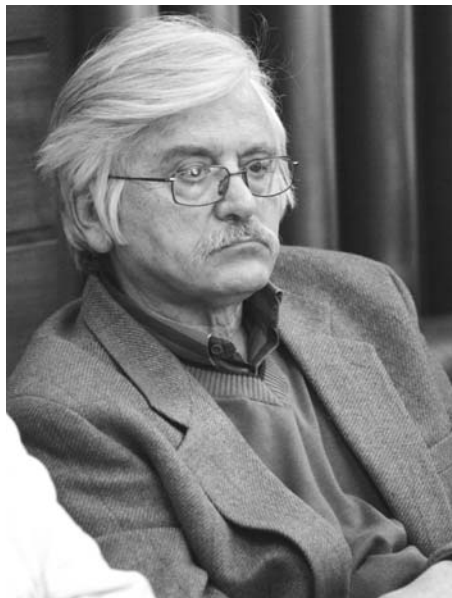


*Anton Srholec*

THE VALUES a society proclaims, respects and cultivates are a reflection of the state of its culture. Values are universal, culture unique. If they are in harmony, one contributes to the other. That is why culture and values are so important. They can connect with the past and with other cultures, join them and not divide. Only the most profound culture can provide something that other nations might eventually take on as part of their own culture.

But are we at the present creating a history with culture and values our descendants can be proud of?

Our prosperity and reforms look different from the outside or from a distance to the way they look from within and close up. We are deeply disturbed by the developments in our society today. The state of our culture especially, is alarming. Culture is not only being starved financially, but also those who make decisions about it undervalue and ignore it.



*Dušan Hanák*

## Nothing to compare

Prosperity and the level of culture in every society are like connected vessels. If this connection is severed, sooner or later the result is a cynical ideological farce. It is nonsense to think that we could build prosperity and infrastructure first and only then start to support and cultivate culture.

A prosperous economy is the motor of society, not its essence. If we fail to recognize this, there will be soon be nothing to save. The producers of kitsch, the scribblers as well as the self-debasing and primitive entertainers who abundantly occupy the public space today, will become the legal tender of high art. There will be nothing, nobody and nowhere to compare with them.

Although it was often an instrument of power, culture reflects the best our society can produce. Ordinary insensitivity or barbarism in dealing with culture is often presented as a question of finance and priorities.

Although money is important, more often it is more a matter of contempt for culture. For example, claims that by saving on culture we will help cancer treatment or that after EU accession we do not need an original culture are nothing more than pure demagoguery.

It also disturbs us that Slovak Television is not widening people's spiritual horizons; it provides very little information about our cultural life and commissions hardly any domestic productions. Instead of being an alternative to the vulgar and commercial, it uses our taxes and licence fees to compete with the private media, which are oriented to high viewing figures and profit.

### **Culture unites**

In the preceding decades our society was divided mainly along political lines: communists-non-communists, nationalists-democrats. Today the division is much more heterogeneous. Apart from political orientation, religious convictions, nationality and social and regional differences play an important role.

This is natural and in a way more positive than the black and white world of the Communist era or the illiberal 1990s. However, such heterogeneity means we retreat into our private lives or form groups, so gradually we feel less and less in common.

Culture could and should be the force that motivates our imaginations, humanizing us and bringing us together, without requiring us to reveal any political affiliations. If culture continues to escape us we will deprive ourselves and our descendents of a meaningful future.

We do not want to believe that our society is indifferent to the state of our culture, art, schools and science. We do not believe that bread and circuses, in the worst sense of the words, are enough for the nation. We do not believe that our society is in such



*Koloman Kertesz Bagala*

a state, but if the development in our society continues, we may soon find ourselves there.

### **Artists without status, young people without alternatives**

Precisely because we know how development led to the present situation, we fear for the fate of our culture. Although discussion of culture and values is obviously also about art, society cannot expect artists to be the only sources and purveyors of culture.

Although art and the creativity associated with it is the centre of gravity which shapes culture, it appears that artists are, so to speak, drained and burned out. They have lost their social status and, like the whole society, some are disoriented in the tangle of overturned values.

It is even sadder that the artists are often divided among themselves, mutually uninformed or envious, which is really no different to the situation in other areas. It is also alarming how politicians, bureaucrats and opportunists have succeeded in creating enmity in parts of the artistic community through financial levers and intrigues.

Young people are the great hope for the future. Yes, they are flexible - they can connect with tradition, but, beware, they can also become estranged or simply raise their anchors, either physically or mentally, without any sign of reproach. Nobody has the



*Jack Martin Händler*

right to force the young to respect certain values or culture. They choose for themselves. However, young people need to be provided with an alternative to the vulgar, philistine trash which streams at them from all sides.

A world without culture and values will not stop the young generation throwing away that which places us among the civilized nations. That is why high quality media, education, cultural institutions or public art schools are so important. That is why it is so important for the creators and bearers of our culture, who are educating the next generation, to have the conditions to educate themselves, practise their art and live in a dignified way.

### **All of us are responsible for the state of culture**

You may ask who this appeal is addressed to: those, who should listen and who have power, who do not feel responsible for the state of our culture, and pursue their own concerns. We are not a lobby group and we are not initiating a petition. Equally, we are not naive people, who do not know or see why the present situation is so sad.

We are aware that society can physically survive without high quality culture,

which also includes alternative and folk art. But what will remain for us and from us if we pass high culture by and it is crushed by trash and vulgarity, which attract only the senses and are measured by the quantity of recipients and by profit?

We realize the paradox that the conditions for the free development of culture should be shaped by precisely the politicians who for years have seen it as a tolerated ornament. In fact, we are all responsible for the state of culture. It is not enough to go to a performance, to the cinema, to read a book, to visit an exhibition or go to a concert, to switch on the radio or sign a petition, although these are necessary and positive activities.

### **Let us show that we need culture**

Therefore, we appeal to the politicians to devote attention to culture as a basic premise of our being. They should do this as a moral obligation, since there is no constitutional duty here.

We also appeal to the artists themselves and to all those who work in the sphere of culture, to strive for professional and guild solidarity.

We appeal to the citizens to ask their elected representatives at all levels - members of parliament, councillors, mayors, regional chief executives or government members - how they are contributing to the cultivation of society or what they will do by the next elections. Remind them that democracy gave them the chance to decide about public matters, so what are they doing for the level of democracy, its culture and values?

Let us make clear - culturally and creatively - that we need culture in our lives. We should not allow the public and living space to be steamrolled by the tabloid and the uncultured. Let us find a way to show that we are not indifferent to culture in Slovakia!