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Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts (Book Review)

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can't help but feel her parents see me as being different. (173)

Despite her many achievements, Iris and a few other interviewees are bitter about their inability to be truly comfortable in either world. While the biracial adoptees expressed this bitterness most frequently, several black adoptees also mentioned this problem. While their skin, hair, and facial features might look black, they speak, dress, and in other ways act like whites. These factors became barriers for them as they tried to build ties with the black community.

While the interviewees for this book may not be typical of all transracially adopted people, their stories are instructive. To some extent all of the adoptees have or had some confusion about identity, but all, with one exception, are adamant supporters of transracial adoption. As Nicole Tremitiere Yates said, "I'd rather someone ended up confused but had the opportunity to grow up in a loving family, regardless of race, than for the child to remain in foster care all of his or her childhood" (152). The interviewees did face confusing times in their lives but felt that the support, love, and values that their families instilled in them helped them to overcome their insecurities. The very strong faith of many of the families and adoptees was one of the key factors that helped

them in times of difficulties. Most of the interviewees were raised in Christian families, many of them Reformed, and it is this thread of dependence on God that makes this book so relevant to Christian adoptive couples.

Part III concludes that transracial adoptions can and do work. However, certain cautions are given. Agencies and adoptive families should make sure that the child is taught about his/her racial background and that the child's culture be a part of his/her everyday life. Denying a child's racial background can cause the development of a weak sense of identity. While we can't control all of the negative forces in society, we can teach the children about their cultural heritage. Making sure that they meet other transracial adoptees can also be helpful, particularly if the child's brothers and sisters are white.

Rita Simon and Rhonda Roorda have not only written a very interesting book but one that is extremely informative. Thirty years ago, the only book suggested to my husband and me when we were considering transracial adoption was *Edgar Allen*, a novel about an unsuccessful transracial adoption. Couples who are considering a transracial adoption today will be much better served by reading *In Their Own Voices*.

Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts, by Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Solway, 1999). 212 pp. ISBN 1-900507-82-X. Reviewed by Joanne Alberda, Professor of Art, Dordt College.

Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin have produced an academic but delightfully written book designed to fill a significant need for students who are contemplating a career or some active involvement in the arts. It is addressed to participants in all of the arts—visual, music, theatre, film, or any combination of the above—as well as interested observers and consumers of art.

The book began as a study guide written by Chaplin, and then it was developed into book form by Brand. In the preface, the authors acknowledge Chaplin's academic and philosophical input and Brand's inclination toward practical hands-on issues. The combination brings a lively discussion between the two which makes the book rich on both fronts. The authors employ the intellectual contributions of Francis Schaeffer and Hans Rookmaaker from the 1960's and 1970's as a foundation for the work of later writers such as Calvin Scriver, Leland Ryken, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and others, each of whom "works from a deep commitment to biblical truth" (viii). The illustrations are rich and varied, and the text sparkles with relevant examples and down-to-earth language.

Art and Soul is divided into five parts, each made up of three or four chapters. In the first section, the authors provide a colorful description of the post-modern world as we might experience it at an exhibition, in the market place, or even within our homes. Beginning with the optimistic tradition of modernism, characterized by man's belief in his own capacity to understand and control the world, and followed by a more pessimistic post-modern era, where all truth is relativized and one's identity defined by one's self, the authors graphically illustrate how artistic activity has not been an easy journey for twentieth-century Christians who desire to work with integrity. Although *spirituality* is fashionable in the post-modern world, it has little to do with the spirituality embedded in the work of the great religious traditions of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Following the upheaval of the Reformation, the relationship between the church and the artist continues to be a painful one. One of the most satisfying characteristics of the book is that the authors not only offer windows of hope and opportunity for Christian artists, but clearly believe that they can and must work within the system to provide

relief and direction. Because post-modernism lacks any over-all guiding or directional philosophy, individuals are consumed by a search for meaning, and when someone is *hungry* for meaning, the opportunity for *filling* that emptiness belongs to those whose hearts are *full*.

In the second part of the book, Brand and Chaplin move on to the basic source material, the Bible, "relating its basic themes to the activity of art" (37). Although Scripture provides no detailed or easy road map for artists, "deeper study will show us that the arts, like every other aspect of human cultural activity, can indeed be rooted in a biblical worldview" (38). Scripture is not an instruction manual but a compendium of literary styles, parables, and metaphors designed to dazzle the imagination; Scripture provides a description of our world capable of taking away the breath of a creature whose eyes have been opened by the Spirit. It does not provide "a theology of the arts, but a biblical framework within which the arts, like all other human activity, can be evaluated and understood" (39).

The subject of creativity often arises in connection with the arts. Are artists more creative than others? Is their talent a special gift known only to an elite few? Although humanity is created in the image of God, the authors carefully define human creativity as something separate and apart from the work of God who creates *ex nihilo*. Nevertheless, "all human beings clearly have, like the Creator God, the ability to conceive, either by reason or imagination, an idea; to express it in language; and then to make it happen" (44). This creative gift, however, can be applied to every aspect of human activity, and is therefore not the mark of only the artist, but of all who are created in God's image. More importantly, what defines us as image-bearers is our assigned role to "tend the garden," to be a steward "managing on behalf of the Owner" (46). To carry out this cultural mandate, we have been given "the marks of creativity...our *sensual* awareness, *imaginative* thinking and *manual* skills...God-given tools in our task of cultivating the earth" (46).

In chapters six and seven, the authors deal with the problems of art and a fallen world, and art and the possibility of redemption. Most Christians do not find it difficult to point out the fallen and distorted character of our world. We Reformed Christians seem to do this particularly well. Sometimes, Christian artists hide behind Paul's admonition to think about "whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable" (Phil. 4:8). However, as the authors point out, these words taken out of context often lead to "a kind of Christian cheeriness that is both bland and artificial" (51). Paul begins that summary of subjects for meditation with "whatever is true," and that truth eventually leads us to consider a sinful, fallen

world, to expose the ugly waste of war and human despair, complex and confusing characters, decay and chaos, as well as to meditate on beauty and order. What sets the art of a Christian apart from the rest is that seed of hope: he does not glory in the decay and distortion, but looks for evidence of cleansing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the chance to begin again. As Brand and Chaplin put it, "The Christian message is that grace is free, but it is not cheap. To make an audience believe in the possibility of redemption, it is necessary to dig under the surface and show the cost" (63). The authors cite many examples of contemporary works that carefully and creatively seek out this truth, such as *Dead Man Walking*, *Shawshank Redemption*, and *Schindler's List*.

In Part Three of *Art and Soul*, Chaplin and Brand apply biblical insight to some basic art issues, particularly worldview as it relates to art, and worship as it relates to art. The dualistic heresy that separates sacred from secular art is attractive to artists because it is so safe and uncomplicated. The authors refer to Murray Watts (Riding Lights Theatre Company) who has serious reservations about Christian drama groups because they "have no particular love or dedication to the art; they are merely intent on putting over the message" (75). Such statements, of course, soon become the basis for heated arguments of any art activity related to church or worship. And here, I believe (possibly because I am personally involved in preparing church liturgies) is found one of the great treasures of this section. Is God to be found only "in the very best?" The authors quote Derek Kidner, who writes, "for there is no doubt that, however we account for it, God has often used the poorest of equipment: not only obscure and weak men, but often the equally unprepossessing products—ugly mission halls, second-rate pictures, bad tunes, illiterate tracts. All these He has so often made to be the gate of heaven to people of all kinds that we might even be tempted to think that the gospel needed the help of bad taste and sentimentality" (76). However, Kidner continues, "we find then, not that God insists on good art or bad, but that he does not restrict himself to either" (76). It is God who works the miracle, though this fact is not an excuse for shoddy or mediocre work.

The authors also discuss the role of art in the practice of worship. What church has not been plagued with heated discussions or even "wars" over music or worship styles, sometimes leaving a trail of casualties or worse, a split church? In a chapter subtitled "help or hindrance," we are given another way to look at the problem. No doubt some of the greatest works in architecture, music, and the visual arts have been created for the church and for worship. For example, the tabernacle in the desert and the temple in Jerusalem were exquisite works of art for their time. However (quoting Derek

Kidner again), "A great aria may be a poor tool, because its own radiance and symmetry steal some of the attention due to the message....picture and frame, so to speak are in competition" (86). The authors go on to say that worship is not an elite activity. It is one in which all levels of society should be able to come as equals. Isaac Watts, the great hymn-writer, made a conscious decision to create hymns that are within the reach of every worshiper: "I would neither indulge any bold metaphors, nor admit of hard words, nor tempt the ignorant worshiper to sing without his understanding....It was hard to sink every line to the level of a whole congregation, and yet keep it above contempt" (86).

As Brand and Chaplin conclude, "those who prefer their worship plain and unadorned are not necessarily...art-haters. For some, worship is about coming *aside* from everyday life, both its drudgery *and* its delights" (86). When we observe the great variety of practices and styles of worship, we are encouraged to *delight* in the rich diversity that makes up the body of Christ. We must remember that "the church is the body of Christ, it is people not buildings. It is our lives, not our art, that will always be his most potent image" (86).

Part Four of the book is an exceedingly practical section that generates wonderful discussions on such issues as the role of aesthetics, the imaginative character of fiction and fairy tales, the emotional power of poetry, the examination of our nation's ethics on the soap operas, the limitations of propaganda, and the clichés of kitsch in an obedient, spirit-filled life. The dualist controversy between reason and emotion has plagued scholars for centuries, but Chaplin and Brand carefully expose the "nonsense that engaging with something emotionally means one cannot engage with it rationally. All great art carries with it both aspects" (106).

Finally, the authors come to a working definition of art. After examining a variety of defining characteristics of art, as well as historical approaches to art, the authors sum up this survey with Calvin Seerveld's definition:

"Art: a sensible object or event
whose identifiable structure
is determined by human construction
that is typically allusive in quality" (123).

Chapter 14 carefully examines the meaning of allusivity; the symbolic character of the art "object;" the role of memories, associations, and emotions; and the *universal* or *timeless* quality, that which breaks through geographical, historical, and social boundaries. The ambiguity of allusivity is "hard to capture. It is never a straightforward statement....its hinting nature means that it is always multi-signal, oblique and ambiguous" (126). The work of both the viewer and the artist is embedded in this concept, allowing for a host of differing responses. It quickly becomes obvious that allusivity is a quality

not only of great art but also of propaganda, advertising, and bad art as well. Allusivity breaks through the barriers between "high" and "low" and "fine" and "applied" art. Historically, it is cloaked in a variety of styles, from "classical allegory, medieval symbolism Romantic expressionism to surrealist absurdity....changing but always articulating the way people saw and experienced life in its nuanced complexity" (131).

Chapter 15 completes this section with a look at how art may be interpreted. The authors describe a variety of inadequate ways to look at a work of art ... the *dollar-sign and column-inches approach*, the *techno-wizardry approach*, or even the *naughty words/nice subject-matter approach*. This discussion is followed by some more traditional ways of approaching the subject, the *socio-historical*, the *biographical*, and the *world view* approach. But the authors settle on a more holistic evaluation of all the vital ingredients that make art art. This integrated evaluation "considers form, content and worldview, and savors the potential strengths and weaknesses of all of them" (146). When any one of the three parts is weak, the work lacks the necessary *integrity* that must characterize a work of art.

In the final section of the book, the authors address some of the questions and challenges facing the artist in the immediate future. One cannot escape the fact that "the computer revolution is just as dramatic as the printing press was in its day: the accompanying shift in philosophy just as marked as that from the Middle Ages to the Reformation and Renaissance" (151). Chaplin and Brand present an optimistic outlook that is neither alarmed nor enraptured by the new technologies; they encourage the exploration of new opportunities and clearly see in the breaking of old barriers a "future with a very different shape from the present" (151). Expect to see art embrace the new technologies but don't expect the older ones to just fade away. Although the forms of art may change, there is no reason to expect that the content should not remain tied to human experience.

Chapter 17 provides a timely discussion of "art as honest labor" (158). There are no shortcuts to fame or fortune, and the artist is usually required to "pay his dues" before he finds the artistic freedom to express or work strictly for himself. The work itself is rooted in the past. While contemporary art seems to demand a *personal* originality, the authors quote T.S. Eliot, among others, who demonstrate that *true originality* generally comes from someone who has been steeped in the tradition of her art. It is, writes Eliot, "historical sense which makes a writer (artist) most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity" (159). The work is characterized by a respect for the medium and a wrestling with skill and inspiration. One cannot wait to be inspired; inspiration comes from the wrestling.

One of the difficult aspects of considering a career in the arts is the fact that one cannot "aggressively demand the right to practice his art, regardless of whether or not it connects with the world around" (161). The authors include some rather startling facts and figures. Less than 20 percent of today's artists and writers earn enough to cover their expenses. If you are still interested the authors have some very practical advice: 1) seek commissions, 2) be willing to compromise, 3) be a conciliator, willing to talk about your work in laymen's terms, 4) listen to criticism, 5) work in the community, not within an elite artistic circle, as comfortable as that might be sometimes, and 6) be a responsible businessperson when it comes to your work and career.

The final chapter in the book is an urgent call for responsible Christian artists to take this cultural calling very seriously. It is critical that the artist understands clearly the trends and media of his or her own time. On the other hand, some things never change, the most important being that "the world wants stories, not one big one, but many small ones. Stories in which we recognize our own lives, narratives rooted in personal experience, and a real, earthy, gritty world; anecdotes and metaphors and illustrations" that illuminate the reality of our lives (177). Scripture provides a model by recording the stories and metaphors used so consistently by Christ himself. The authors encourage us to reject

the "knee-jerk irony" so characteristic of contemporary art in its detachment and lack of involvement or commitment. Like Jesus in the wilderness, advise the authors, beware of pretension and power, serve God first, take responsibility for your work and actions, and let your work affirm basic and lasting values over the long haul.

Finally, a few words about the layout and illustrations included in the text. On the outer margins of each page, the authors have included many quotes from a broad range of writers and artists. These quotes illustrate the authors' wide-ranging research. More than 50 black-and-white illustrations are set in separate boxes with text to demonstrate the point visually. The text is exceptionally brilliant, easy to read, and free of jargon. I have used *Art and Soul* as a text for a Senior Seminar in the visual arts, and it was enthusiastically received by the students. Its usefulness, however, is certainly not limited to the classroom: anyone involved in music, theatre, film, or the visual arts will find a wealth of stimulating material for inspiration and discussion on a variety of levels. I have found this book to be the most valuable addition to my library in a long time.

Intelligent Design: The bridge between science and theology, by William A. Dembski (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999). 312 pages. \$19.99. ISBN 0-830-815813. Reviewed by James Mahaffy, Professor of Biology, Dordt College.

Ever since the psalmist cried out, "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps.19:1), believers have praised the Creator as they have seen His hand in the creation. However, our current science, unlike that of the days of Isaac Newton, has become increasingly secular and no longer sees the hand of God in the origin or the sustaining of the creation. There is a current movement among evangelical Christians called "Intelligent Design" (ID) that seeks to refute this idea. This movement, whose origins can be traced to the arguments of Phil Johnson in his 1991 book *Darwin on Trial*, sees the neo-Darwinian synthesis on origins as a failure and seeks to show that the world (or creation) provides evidence for a designer. Part of the attractiveness of the movement stems from the support given by people such as Mike Behe and Bill Dembski, scholars with established reputations in the fields they are challenging. Behe, a biochemist, makes a case for the "irreducible complexity" of certain structures at the cellular level. Dembski, who has published in the areas of mathematics and philosophy, developed mathematical support for

the scientific detection of design, and in 1998 he published his theory in the book, *The Design Inference* (Cambridge Press).

While his previous book was written for mathematicians, *Intelligent Design: The bridge between science and theology* is written at a level that can be understood by the average science undergrad. The book is also broader in scope, beginning with the historical and philosophical background of modern science. This context is a real strength of the book and is especially important for science students, since scientists tend to think their science is based solely on the evidence and they often try to be ahistorical, denying the effects of their own culture and history. I especially enjoyed the chapter devoted to British natural theology, which analyzed its strengths and weaknesses very well. Dembski also makes clear (as others have) that Darwin's theory was accepted in large part because it provided a non-miraculous explanation for origins that fit the philosophy of the science of that age. I also applaud the attempt to dethrone the stranglehold of a contemporary science