

Re-thinking Aesthetic Reality & Aesthetic Creativity In A Postmodern Culture

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do. (*Ephesians 2:10*, TNIV)

"We make things, but we aren't them."

(Five year old girl on the quad at Syracuse University, 1986.)

"The God creates. Humans are created to create. Animals don't do art, they are art."
(*Plagueman*)

I. Introduction

Has there recently evolved among us sapiens (again) an irreconcilable divide between faith and reason, between intellect and spiritual-mystic intuition, between analytic thought and emotion? Has a kind of "romantic gnosticism" re-emerged out of the void of existential nihilism (maybe after the Beat Generation became mainstream) to ring a death-knell to the scholarly rationalism of the Middle Ages and the Christian humanist ideals of the Enlightenment? On a similar tack, if the subject matter of art is "the world," then knowledge of the world (history, physics, archeology, astronomy, philosophy, literature) is vital for the aspiring artist to pursue aesthetic creativity—and thus a re-turn to "liberal arts education." To create great art, important art, relevant art, one must have as much knowledge of the world as possible; and not just feelings and impressions, but reliable data, information. To do art, it is not enough to be in touch with one's feelings and emotions, one's interior self, though this is valuable; one must think—and think well. The intellect is as important in the process of aesthetic creativity as aesthetic perception, vision, and techné. Within Jewish and Xian tradition at their best, there is no dichotomy between, on the one hand, the mind (intellect, reason), and, on the other hand, immediate perception and "aesthetic intuition."

When they create, artists want to believe—and generally do believe—they are doing something, that with their hard work things change in the real world out there, beyond their inner minds, that things come into being that weren't there before, things that matter, that have meaning, that communicate; artists want to believe that they are doing something more than, at best, playing with other people's brain states, and at the least, personal therapy for their own troubled souls; they want to believe they are doing more than merely emoting and thereby, maybe, affecting the emotions of other homosapients on a purely subjective, psychological level.

Throughout human history, in one form or another, artists (humans that see aesthetic reality and are driven to create stuff in response to what they see) and non-artists (humans that have not focused with purpose and will and intention to do art) have affirmed, or lived as if it was true, some form of an objective theory of art.

With the "epistemic egoism" (followed by the "epistemic cynicism") of the Enlightenment, more and more of reality was subjugated to cultural, socio-political, and psychological reductionist critique, and the world of art went the way of the dodo bird, religion, and anything resembling human free will. As humans are seen more and more as mere carbon-based biological machines (and ironically machines give us more and more the illusion of being "intelligent"), concepts of creativity, aesthetic reality, art and non-art became meaningless.

How has this state of affairs come about? What has the "Christian Church" in the western world done over the last hundred plus years about it? Where are we now?

II. The Postmodern Turn

Back in the 1960s and 70s, the prophets, Francis and Edith Schaeffer noted the following phenomenon: the philosophy, worldview and hermeneutics of academia filter down into the populous over a period of years and decades. Generally, the church (the orthodox, historic Christian church) will be thirty years (a generation) behind contemporary thought in its critique of the culture and its philosophical undercurrents, and ends up mostly reactionary, couched in archaic speech, and irrelevant.

Oxford scholar and atheist-turned-Christian, Alister McGrath, in *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise And Fall Of Disbelief In The Modern World* (New York, 2004), sees a link between modernity and the "religion" of atheism, such that the shift from modernity to postmodernity is much to blame for the demise of atheism (in the Western world). "If there is a symbiotic relationship between atheism and modernity, what happens if that synergy is ruptured through radical cultural change?" (McGrath, p. 216.) It is precisely the cultural change from a positivist, scientific utopianism of eventual social uniformity to a relativist postmodern outlook that has likewise turned the tide against the atheist worldview in favor of a spiritualist reawakening.

"Convinced that the human imagination and emotions needed something to inspire them, many writers of the first decades of the nineteenth century now found themselves in something of a quandary. Caught up in the enthusiasm evoked by the radical ideas of the French Revolution, they were more than willing to jettison the lingering attachment to organized religion and its notions of divinity. Yet the explicit atheism of Godwin and others left them with nothing to which they could meaningfully anchor their sense of transcendence. If God was being irreversibly relegated to the margins of British culture, to be replaced by the more predictable and unimaginative enterprise of merely attending church, they would have to find something else to which to attach their longing for the transcendent. They found what they were looking for in nature itself." (McGrath, 116.)

Art and creativity turned from a worldview cloistered in the traditional Church, Anglican or Catholic, to unbounded nature and our place within it, and the spirituality within us. This was the Promethean revolution that bridged the gap between *Science* (empiricism) and the longing for art, beauty, utopian ideals, and hope for a better future for all humankind. Rather than we being stewards and caretakers of creation (nature), we were seen as one with nature, an integral part of nature, with an internal pantheistic spark replacing an external, and unknowable God.

Modernity: "...a confident, ebullient movement, convinced of the supreme ability of human reason to understand the world and hence to master and control it. There was no longer any need for a God to confirm or underwrite a settled and stable order of moral values, social relations, or rules of thought. All could be established with certainty and universality through human reason. Atheism was the religious belief of choice for this movement, in that it resonated profoundly with its presuppositions and goals. It is no accident that the rise of atheism in the West is so closely tied to that of modernity." (McGrath, p. 218.)

While the rise of such Victorian spiritism (Bergson, et al) helped created an extreme dualism or schizophrenia in the twentieth century between "scientific, empirical, material reality" and any kind of "spiritual and aesthetic reality," by the end of the twentieth century, positivist "scientism" (logical positivism and verificationism) was falling into disillusionment, nihilism, and hopelessness. The decline of a monolithic worldview like "Atheism" (and their socio-political counterparts, Marxism/Socialism/Communism, whether of a Stalinist, Fascist or Chinese sort) coupled to the failure of modernity, gave way to postmodernity and a reinterest in spirituality and the transcendent—and the aesthetic.

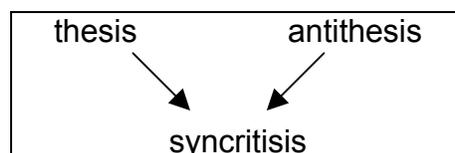
At the turn of the twenty-first century, with the loss of confidence in the ideals of an atheist state, a secular socialist utopia of human invention, it is becoming clear that good or evil, virtue, justice, that these are not necessarily intrinsic to political ideologies, movements, or worldviews – but rather more intrinsic to the humans founding them, promoting and leading them. "Atheism was once new, exciting, and liberating, and for those reasons held to be devoid of the vices of the faiths it displaced. On closer inspection, and with greater familiarity over time, it turned out to be just as bad, possessed of just as many frauds, psychopaths, and careerists as its religious alternatives." (McGrath, p. 261-62.)

Today, the "postmodern church," (i.e., established denominations such as the Episcopal Church or the Presbyterian Church, and those congregations that overtly follow or quietly associate with such oversight bodies) seeks to lead its people, and especially the next generation at the cutting-edge vanguard of the "postmodern turn," to take a lead in shaping American postmodern spirituality. These church institutions and their ruling power-elite have been jockeying for that cultural leadership position since the latter decades of the last century, and may truly vie for a dominant place near the head of the table of the *brave new world* of human spiritual evolution, including its gradualist cognates of trans-genderism, pansexualism, interspeciesism and cybernetics.

Consider two questions. Question 1: what sort of *ekklesia* community (local church) should stay inside the Postmodern spiritual box? Answer: that congregation that has the cutting edge academic context and constituency that can speak articulately to the postmodern philosophical milieu without compromising the truth (*Truth*, fact of the matter about the real world) or succumbing to the allure of comfortable syncretism (all roads lead to Rome, heaven, happiness). Question 2: what sort of Christian community should brush off the dust from their sandals, leave (disassociate from) the "postmodern church," and seek honest, biblical, orthodox Christian oversight? Answer: that congregation that sees its mission as preaching and living out the radical and simple message of Jesus Christ, and that seeks to model godly and mystic simplicity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, at the feet of Jesus, in monastic prayer, witness, worship and service.

At least the respectful madness of classic *existentialism* was thoughtful, focused, like a diamond facet: the utter meaninglessness of existence (epitomized in the silence of Zen Buddhism); the angst generated from ones acute awareness of ones existence in a meaningless cosmos; and, the final blow, having the capacity for consciousness and free choice among meaningless options—Roquentin's dilemma (*Nausea*, Jean Paul Sartre, 1964, pp. 126ff). Whereas postmodernism is more a plethora of chaos, a plenum of confusion: not a bare biological trap of brutish material existence, but a noisy cacophony of philosophical syncretism evolving like *Vertumnus* in a deconstructivist universe of ghosts, spirits, minds, bodies, politics and power, where everything can be know (inside ones self) and nothing is known, where thesis and antithesis characterizes all, and synthesis is the end of the dream (with no single, ideal higher truth).

Postmodern Hegeleanism



In the mid- to late-80s, it was precisely the application of analytic epistemology to aesthetics that was the hope of rescuing philosophy of art (aesthetics) from the deconstructivist, contextualist critique. The epistemology of aesthetic perception and the resultant metaphysics of the work of art would be the propedeutic (the medicine) to a non-normative descent into relativist art-worlds babel (analogous to the fad of "multiple intelligences" theory in philosophy of education; e.g. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, 1983). The works of Alston, Plantinga, Walterstorff lay the epistemic groundwork for an objective theory of art arising out of the analytic philosophical tradition, addressing the coming age of irrationalism and what is now often called "emotive individualism."

III. An Epistemic Response To The Postmodern Turn

Of the gulf between the modern "liberal" weltanschauung (worldview) and the "historic-orthodox" weltanschauung (cf. the theology of Paul Tillich), the bottom line is: any response to the postmodern turn is a matter of philosophy of language and centers on the nature of "The God Who Has Spoken" (i.e., the Bible, Special Revelation). Or to put it in the broader context of general philosophy, it is the gulf, respectively, between a low view of language and art (emotive, non-semantic) and a high view of language and art (objective communication being possible between subjective sentient beings, based on faculty psychology construal of human cognition, e.g. vis-à-vis Scottish theologian Thomas Reid, and secular linguists Noam Chomsky and John Searl); on this latter, high view of language, humans possess, built into the hardware of their brains, certain linguistic mechanisms (for atheists, by evolution, and for theists, by being created in the image of the God, which). For the orthodox Xian, such linguistic hardware is seen as the basis of the God communicating objective semantic content in Special Revelation, the Bible.

In the final analysis, then, it is one's view of Scripture (Special Revelation) and one's hermeneutics (principles of interpretation) upon which one's Xian faith and worldview stands or falls. For the apostles living before Jesus-God-Incarnate, the question was "Who do you say that I am?" For us today, it is a little more complicated, the question being rather "What is the nature of revelation (of Scriptures)" in which we find the answer to the dual questions "Who is Jesus?" and "Who do you say that Jesus is?" We're one step removed from that incarnation moment in history, and the Bible is the epistemic intermediary, the gospel message of hope, the message of truth, the objective and public communication from the God for the gathered body of believers (*ekklesia*) and missionaries from one generation to the next generation, until the 2nd coming, "the blessed hope."

It is crucial in this "postmodern" moment to have not only a Biblically educated community of believers (young and old alike), but an Xian community that clearly understands the absolute necessity of sound hermeneutics underlying Biblical study and knowledge. We must not just be a radical community of people dedicated to social justice and service to our neighbors (living out the existential, mystic faith in the day by day); but we must be, as well, an educated community of lay scholars, theologically, Biblically, hermeneutically. Or else we will not be able to give a clear and articulate answer to the hope that is in us before a world that has cynically given up on objective truth or the possibility of epistemic access to any objective truth about the nature of existence.

Modernism (beginning with the 18th Century Enlightenment) gave us one challenge to address: arrogant materialism and secular rationalism (and their progeny verificationism, scientism, and social evolution); with WWI, secular idealism began its tumultuous decline. Postmodernism gives us a new challenge to address: arrogant syncretism and cynical

irrationalism (and their offspring neo-paganism, spiritism, animism, neo-gnosticism, tribalism and multi-speciesism). The present generation is in transition from the former to the latter. This can be very confusing when it comes to knowing "how" to speak the truth of the Gospel; but, *thank the God*, the joyous—and frightening—content of Gospel truth doesn't change! We have Special Revelation, the Word of the God (historically construed). The old modernist-liberalism has only their subjective opinions, their own inner "ecstatic experiences," the natural revelation, natural theology route of Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Tillich, et al.

IV. The Epistemology of Aesthetic Perception (An Objective Theory of Art – *Aesthetic Reality Is Out There*)

In modern/postmodern times, in nearly every discussion that turns to art, inevitably the sentiment, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," is voiced by someone.

This line comes from an Irish romance novel, *Molly Bawn* (1878), best known work by Victorian author Margaret Wolfe Hungerford (b. Cork 1855, d. of typhoid in Bandon 1897), and described by John Sutherland as "a love tale with a light-headed Irish colleen" (*The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction*, Harlow: Longmans, 1988).

How or when this romance novel sentiment evolved into or became the slogan for a whole pop school of "postmodern" relativist, psychological reductionist philosophy of art is hard to say. But for that single line, few today remember the author or her works. (Is not history a series of accidents waiting to happen, the original one being when the first sapient responded to the CreatorArtist with, "Oooops! I didn't break it...I didn't do it...don't look at me...er, he did it! That guy over there"—and then the local cosmos began its slow unraveling, and Abnormal Psych became the second great profession, after gardening.)

For an example of the ambiguity in those who uncritically quote this statement, first asserting it, then asserting its opposite, look at: <http://artbasement.com/sculpture/main.htm>;

"'Beauty is altogether in the eye of the beholder'."

"I try to bring out the hidden beauty in otherwise ordinary items."

Note, in both sentences, the use of the preposition "in."

Another example comes from Judith A. Stock's web-essay, "I'm Having an Art Attack, Get Me to a Museum," <http://www.folksonline.com/folks/hh/tours/2000/museum.htm>;

"Okay, so the title is a little dramatic but it did get your attention. Art is just like that. Dramatic, edgy, electric or mellow, the artist has a vision they want the viewer to see. Sometimes what you see is a sharp edged crimson tree in a Dali oil or a wandering cerulean blue line dissecting a Georgia O'Keefe painting.

"As the author Margaret Wolfe Hungerford stated in her novel *Molly Bawn*, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." As the quote states, art is subjective. No two people perceive a painting in the same manner. There are so many choices in art today that everyone should be able to find an area where they feel comfort."

There seem to be three main versions of the quote; one without the word "altogether," one with the word, and one where "eye" is plural. Hmm...reminiscent of "the telephone game"? Note, the phrase is neither in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (13th edition) nor in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (3rd edition). I have as yet not been able to verify the exact wording of the phrase (and I don't really care to read the book).

Thinking critically, in a broken universe, is not always easy; it is not always comfortable; it is not the easy *opium-SOMA Brave New World* road. Yet, thinking about art honors the hard work of the artists among us, and it gives recognition to the difficult calling and life of the artist

and to the key role of art in culture to communicate truth. Remember, the first thing the God did was create a real, physical universe (not merely mental constructs or mythological realms); then the God created beings, bearers of the *imago dei* (image of the God), who would in turn create beauty—as gardeners, and as worshipers and fellowshippers with the Great Artist. We were created to be creative: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works." Even in a broken world, our calling to create (truthfully) is intrinsic and key to our very nature.

"Harken, dear fellow Xians. Hath not the God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which has been promised to them that love God?" (JAMES 2:5)

Afterward: As in Asian martial arts, one must regularly exercise and discipline the mind to think critically and perceive analytically, and, with elegance and simplicity, to evaluate the world of ideas found in popular media, press, and culture. And one must train and develop the mind with a view to a life-long practice and habit of thinking philosophically and living aesthetically. By our very nature, all of us homosapiens are philosophers, thinkers, evaluators of life, the universe, and everything (some of us just get paid for it). Therefore, to be a lifelong learner and creator, contributing to the edification of the culture and the world through speaking and living out truth, one should begin in the now and the day-by-day with the intellectual and spiritual disciplines of clear thinking, careful seeing, and intentional and conscious meditation on beauty and truth, existence, life, dogs and cats and flower gardens, pain and evil, suffering and madness, the good, the aesthetic, the human, and the divine.

Love through me, Love of God,
Make me like Thy clear air
Through which unhindered, colors pass
As though it were not there.

Powers of the love of God,
Depths of the heart Divine,
O Love that faileth not, break forth,
And flood this world of Thine.

St. Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur (1875-1951). *If*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980 (originally published, 1938).

Shalom, and may the God of serious art protect you from the aesthetic void,
K. D. Kragen, kdkragen.com, killware.com, plagueman.com, trumeau.info

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