

Seeing Art from a Christian Worldview

Submitted for Tenure at Belhaven University

By Bob Pennebaker

In submitting this paper, I am compelled to state that I am primarily a practitioner, not an academic. I state this not as an excuse, nor as an apology, but in order to make a point that I believe is pertinent to the issues that will follow.

I am a “visual” artist. I mean that not as an identifying category, but as a description of how I process the majority of my life experiences. I am keenly interested in philosophy and theology, but I make no pretensions to philosophical sophistication. I “see” things. Not, hopefully, in a schizophrenic sense, but in a literal, optical, perceptual, physical sense. From my earliest childhood memories and my lifelong journey as an artist, this has been the dominant mode of processing my life experiences. Even as a small child, I recall being enthralled with the act and experience of seeing. Nuances of light, atmosphere, color, texture, form, including smells and other sensory sensations are etched in my memories.

Though my heightened fascination with visual experience is probably more extreme than for most, I have come to suspect that most people are as affected by their visual experiences and other sensory functions, as much as, if not more so, than rational thought. By no means am I suggesting that rational thought is subordinate to visual and sensory experience. However, in the pursuit of understanding truth and reality, Christians often seem to imply that intellectual and rationally understood truth is superior to sensorially derived truth. Such a view skews and fragments biblical truth and reality, and also our worldview understanding of all disciplines, including the arts.

Such a view contributes to a lack of understanding of the role of the arts in God's grand scheme. The arts speak powerfully and beautifully to a holistic understanding of all dimensions of life and reality. This is an important reason why Christians need as complete and thorough an understanding of the arts as possible, and why we need artists to fulfill their calling in the Kingdom of God.

As I address the philosophical and methodological presuppositions of current secular thinking in the visual arts, and compare and contrast those presuppositions with relevant biblical presuppositions, I will continue to attempt to show and clarify the role that actual, visual perception plays in one's understanding of the current state of art.

The current dominant philosophical influence in art is postmodernism. Postmodern philosophy marks a radical break from and rejection of the premises of modernity. By no means however, are we not still largely influenced by the premises and effects of modernism. Therefore, most scholarly thinking regarding these issues, emphasize the need to compare and contrast the premises of both views.

The ideas behind the views and principles of modernity arose from the period recognized as the Enlightenment, occurring during the 17th and 18th centuries. New views of philosophy began to set the tone of a new paradigm of exploring and understanding reality. Coupled with major new developments in science and significantly increased confidence in man's capabilities to use human reasoning, enthusiasm was high for discovering, harnessing, and applying new knowledge for the overall betterment of mankind. However, the more that man looked to his own

capabilities and potential, the less he looked to the supernatural God. By reason, i.e., viewing the world through lens of scientific processes, the supernatural could not be empirically observed or proven. Human reasoning demanded rejection or, at least, suspicion, of such ideas. All notions of transcendence became suspect. Further philosophical developments in this direction ultimately resulted in the view known as naturalism. The essential, most basic premise of naturalism is that the only observable and knowable existence is matter. There is nothing else. A true sea change in history had occurred. This view came to, and still does, dominate most intellectual, academic, scientific, and cultural thinking.

A summary of the basic characteristics and presuppositions of modernity would include several tenets:

- A focus on the natural as opposed to the supernatural.
- The universe is viewed as objective, knowable, and mechanistic.
- Science and the scientific method are given the supreme role in understanding the true and real.
- Perception and reason are the primary human means of evaluating and knowing nature.
- A high emphasis on the autonomous individual.
- Progress, as measured by subduing nature for the benefit of mankind, is viewed as inevitable and good.
- Man is master of his own fate.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, modernity's influence on visual art, ushered in the era of modern art. Artists took increasing interest in the mind and inner subjective experience. Aided by a growing number of philosophical theories of skepticism and irrationality, many began to doubt modernity's optimistic hopes. Art works

began to express a growing pessimism and cynicism. In many ways, art was becoming more of a philosophically abstract endeavor. The search for truth replaced the search for aesthetic beauty. Reflecting the growing sense of despair and meaninglessness of most disciplines, these new expressions of art mirrored those sentiments. Reductionist theories led many to focus solely on eliminating as much as possible from painting to see what could survive and, hopefully, get closer to the essence of painting. Various reductionist strategies continued to whittle away in search for that essence until, by the 1960's, there was little left to reduce. Modern art had run out of gas.

Modernity's failure to bring about the positive outcomes that it had confidently predicted was being challenged at its very core by the tenets of postmodernity. In contrast to modernity, the essential presuppositions undergirding postmodernity are as follows:

- The idea that a search for truth with a capital *T* is futile. It does not, nor has it ever existed.
- There are no all-encompassing, universal explanations or metanarratives.
- All truths are relative.
- Objectivity is a myth.
- Personal identity and values are socially, environmentally, linguistically, and subjectively constructed.
- Social and political power resides with those who control language.
- Deconstructing the language of the politically powerful is necessary in order to balance the scales toward the less preferred or oppressed.
- All interpretations are equally valid.
- The community takes precedent over the individual.

The most apparent effects of postmodernism on art and cultural expression can be seen in the pluralistic appropriation of past, seemingly contradictory, irrelevant styles. The modernists goal of purity and essence is rejected by the diversity and eclecticism of the postmodernists juxtaposing techniques. Intended in these approaches, is a deliberate undermining and questioning of any and all absolutes.

The most common methodological approaches used today to get at an understanding of works of art include Formalism, Iconography, Ideological Marxism, Feminism, Biography and Autobiography, Structuralist-based Semiotics and Psychoanalysis. In what follows, I will provide a very brief summary description of the presuppositions of each of these methodologies.

- Formalism regards form as inseparable from content. Meaning is derived from the arrangement of visual elements, such as line, color, and shape, rather than from the subject matter.
- Iconography literally means the “writing of the image” and refers to the layers of meaning embedded in subject matter. This method assumes that a work is based on some type of narrative.
- Ideological Marxism is rooted in the writings of Karl Marx. This method interprets artworks in light of their economic and social contexts. All art, according to this position, supports some political cultural, or economic agenda.
- Feminism is concerned with the oppression of groups, especially women. It advocates equality. It deals with the representation of gender in art, and how this representation can be used to support male-dominated social structures.
- The Biography method works from the basis that an artist’s life and personality give meaning to the art he or she produces.
- Autobiography works from the basis that the artwork is an expression of the artist’s life.

- Structuralist-based Semiotics: Semiotics is a system of signs. The semiotic sign has two parts, the signifier and the signified, which are like two sides of a coin. This method thinks of works of art in terms of objective signs that are able to be evaluated as sign systems or structures. There are three subbranches of this method.
 1. Structuralism: tends to eliminate a consideration of the artist in interpreting a work.
 2. Post-Structuralism: interpretations of works are not restricted to objective systems. Instead, personal elements, including the response of the viewer and the role of the artist, are considered.
 3. Deconstruction: this approach opens up the structural systems and questions traditional assumptions about what we see, or think we see.
- The Psychoanalysis approach considers the underlying unconscious meaning of a work. It looks at art as the product of individuals who have been influenced and shaped by their own personal pasts, unconscious urges, and their social history.

The relevant biblical presuppositions for the discipline of art begin with the opening statement of Genesis. In verse one, God is declared as The Creator of all things. The very first attribute of God of which we are made aware is His creating/making nature. Continuing in verses 26 - 27, scripture tells us that man was made in the image and likeness of God. These two facts, that God is the Creator/Maker and we as men are made in His image, establishes a most important precedent valuing, justifying and requiring the responsible use of our own creative making.

We are also told in these early biblical passages that man is distinctly different from the rest of creation. Man is given a mandate to cultivate, manage, and steward the

earthy creation. The implication is that this will require knowledge, creativity, and artful skill. Making art is a dimension of cultivating the earth.

Furthermore, in the second chapter of Genesis, an aesthetic value is established regarding creation. In verse nine, we are told that God made all kinds of trees and they were both pleasing to the eye and for food. The sheer pleasure of sight and variety are obviously important to God.

Additionally, the vocational calling of visual artists is given a huge affirmation, as the book of Exodus describes the role of Bezalel, the lead designer/artist of the Tabernacle and the first person mentioned in scripture to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The design details given by God for the building of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, provide ample proof of God's interest in the aesthetic dimensions of life.

As good and well as all this is, it is tinged by the fact that man, in his freedom to choose, has a propensity to place his own desires above the desires of his loving, all wise Creator. Sin, the fundamental flaw in man's nature, has caused a separation between God and His whole creation. God's original intention for man has been altered and is in need of redemption. All of man's activities and relationships have suffered the scarring of his rebellion and sinfulness. Man's only hope of redemption and restored relationship with his Maker is in an acknowledgment and acceptance of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. For those who accept this gracious gift, it is good news beyond all description. It is the ultimate motivation to make expressions in art to the glory of and in appreciation of our glorious Maker and Redeemer.

It is within this biblical framework that the role of art and artists has to be understood. And from this framework, it is not at all difficult to compare and contrast the essential premises of modernism and postmodernism with the essential premises of the Christian worldview.

Modernism and postmodernism share similar views on the issue of the ultimate meaning of life. Modernism contends that since transcendent meaning cannot be empirically tested, it rejects, or at best, is suspicious of it. Postmodernism completely rejects the possibility of meaning on the grounds that all ideas of meaning and reality are constructed through language, social needs, and political power plays, including the modernist's use of and manipulations of the scientific method. Both views obviously clash with the biblical view of the God who is really "there" and has made reality such that all of life is teeming with meaning.

Scripture teaches us in Romans 1:18-20 and Psalm 19:1-2 that all men in their heart of hearts are able to know, by observing the natural creation, that there is a God and that they are without excuse in their denial of this truth. Man's denial of God is based on his sin, pride, and rebellion, not on a justifiable rational basis. All of mankind craves and senses the innate potential for meaning that God has built into all of creation. Love, truth, beauty, and purpose all reflect various aspects of meaning. Man, however, wants his meaning on his own terms with no reciprocal responsibility to any other agent. In other words, man wants to be his own god. Therefore, scripture teaches that God allows man to foolishly rationalize that life just doesn't make sense and can't possibly have ultimate meaning.

Much art that is made reflects these sentiments. The hopelessness, despair, and anger that ultimately follows a denial of God comes screaming through the innate power of aesthetic expression. And, because of that aesthetic, expressive power, often more is communicated than by mere words alone. Thankfully though, much art that is made by those who otherwise deny and reject their Creator, is able to and does reflect the true nature of God's reality.

Certain aspects of the tenets of modernity are not in conflict with a biblical view. Scripture supports the use of human reasoning to discern between right and wrong. Good reasoning is needed for one to make wise decisions and to solve problems. The scientific method is a good and useful process for understanding and cultivating God's creation. The biblical view places a high value on the worth of the individual. But, modernity lost its balance and the pride of man used the discoveries of his new knowledge and technologies to push God out of the equation.

Postmodernism has no higher view of God's reality -- in fact, it has a greatly diminished view -- but it calls the bluff of modernity's confidence and positivism. It also makes us aware of the potential to play manipulative word and power games in our social discourse. It encourages a healthier participation in community, less individualistic than modernity. In applications of art, postmodernism opens up a much larger door of participation and styles. And since it views all interpretations as equally valid, it potentially allows the work and voice of Christians a place that modernity never would.

However, on the issue of rejecting all universal explanations of truth, Christianity must and does emphatically part ways with postmodern philosophy.

On the whole, artists who are Christians are standing on the threshold of the greatest opportunities they have ever faced. There is growing evidence to support such a view. Many artists of deep faith in Christ are increasingly crossing over the chasm in the art world that was put in place by the avant-garde of modernism. It is true that postmodernism holds many new and unknown challenges, but those challenges represent exciting new possibilities for artist to share in the process of God making all things new.

Projected Three Year Goals:

Over the next three years, I intend to explore several paths of interest that I believe will make me a more effective teacher, artist, and believer.

As I mentioned in the opening remarks of this paper, I approach the subject of art by beginning with visual perception, not art theory or history. Many art educators believe that studying art history and attending art museums and exhibitions will result in an informed, appreciative, and supportive audience. Generally, my experience does not bear this out. To the contrary, the general public, including the church and even most with educational credentials, exhibits little interest, understanding, nor need for the visual arts, other than at the lowest common denominator of popular culture and decor.

Why is this so? I think it is because we have lost the capacity to “see.” This is possibly a result of the “visual fallenness” of man and an effective strategy of Satan to keep mankind distracted from important, necessary aspects of human experience.

Who, among us, does not feel the relentless bombardment of too much visual noise and the over stimulated clutter of too many, unrelated, images coming at us? Many people have been visually damaged and numbed by the constant barrage of our modern, mass-media culture. In most cases, vision is the first and primary sense from which we receive information. Yet, much of our educational processes fail to prepare us for this. As a result, many suffer from visual illiteracy, oblivious to the fact. As an art educator, I have a responsibility to help reclaim and redeem peoples' capacity to see.

In regard to art students, the means for doing this is through drawing. Artists don't learn to draw so that they may produce drawings, but that they may learn to see.

Drawing is dependent on the eyes, not the hands. This requires a kind of seeing that goes beyond merely looking at the appearance of things. But, the appearance of things must be thoroughly and adequately explored, in order to get to realizations of things beyond mere appearance. The goal is sight that gets beyond appearances and into the symbolic, metaphorical, interpretive, and expressive potential of things. Drawing is a means by which the soul is able to touch and connect with the visible creation. Making art is a means by which the soul is able to express regarding those connections.

For quite a long time, I have had a sense that my primary strength and offering as an art teacher is in the realm of drawing. I am captivated and intrigued by the entire process. Since drawing plays such a critical and foundational role in the success of our program, I am highly motivated to continue to investigate new and more effective ways to help my students go deeper in their drawing experiences.

I intend to do a serious study of a book considered to be a classic in the field of visual cognition, *Art and Visual Perception*, by Rudolf Arnheim. Additionally, two other books I plan to study are *The Thinking Eye, the Seeing Brain: Explorations in Visual Cognition*, by James T. Enns and *Visual Intelligence*, by Donald D. Hoffman.

Many art colleagues and former students of the past dozen years, have encouraged me to write a book describing the unique approach I have to teaching drawing. I have resisted doing so, partly out of a fear of the process, but largely, from not feeling that what I have to say on the issue is needed, nor unique enough, to justify another book on the subject. However, I have come to the conclusion that I do have something unique to contribute. I've also realized that I need a collaborative writer/partner in the process. My good friend and art department colleague, Dr. Melissa Hause, and I have seriously discussed such a collaboration. I intend to begin that process this coming summer. Actually, I've been collecting materials related to such a project for the past few years.

In regard to the layman, the issue is also the loss of seeing capacity. There is a certain sense in which all men are born with the capacity to see. Otherwise, natural revelation would not be possible and man would not be without excuse, as Romans 1:18-23 states. Of course, the kind of sight that these verses refer to include spiritual sight, not just visual sight. Verse 21 refers to *hearts* that have become darkened, not just eyes. However, that capacity to see creation and know that God has made it, sheds helpful insight into how God uses art as a form of continuing natural revelation. And, since visual perception most often precedes rational perception, I contend that the most natural way to heal and restore lost sight capacity is through learning to see nature at its

most basic level, as comprised of lines, colors, tones, textures, and shapes. These elements make up the basic vocabulary of all visual, material experience, including art. Everything that is possible to see can be broken down into one, or some combination, of these five elements. Every human being throughout life, constantly encounters this most basic visual reality. I call it "The Line, Color, Tone, Texture, Shape Connection." This sounds almost too simple. It is simple and profoundly so. God has designed the whole of creation so that all may see.

All human encounters and activity with the material world involve an engagement with these basic visual elements. Whether it is a hunter in the woods, a cook stirring the ingredients of a cake, a football player falling on a muddy field, an accountant making graphite marks in a ledger, a surgeon cutting into flesh, a lover touching the hand of his beloved, a child jumping in mud puddles, or an adult jumping in mud puddles, we all encounter these basic elements and experience other sensory responses in doing so.

This is also what artists experience at the most primal level of their encounters with the material, visual world. The problem is that the layman thinks that what the artist experiences is far beyond and hardly at all what any layman experiences. This is a mistake. This view is a result of the misguided and incorrect notion of modernity of the artist as creative genius, set apart from mere mortals. It is wrong and is not biblical. It has hurt the artist and the layman by emphasizing their differences, rather than what they have in common. Therefore, I contend that when the layman realizes that his visual and sensory experiences are essentially identical to the artist, this changes

everything. His outlook, openness, and approach to considering what art might have to offer, and that it might actually be relevant to his life and experiences, are placed in a whole new perspective. The failure of artists, the institution of art, and art education to realize and correct this, amounts to a shooting in the foot and a sabotage of its own acceptance and success.

In attempting to address this issue myself, I will continue to make presentations to civic and business clubs, arts organizations, schools, and churches. In particular, I would love to participate in a more in-depth format within the Belhaven family of faculty, staff, and board. I also plan to create a spiritual/aesthetic retreat program and to make it available to churches and businesses.

Additionally, I am experimenting with some new directions in my own art making that address these issues and will offer opportunities for others, artists and layman, to participate in the making of these works. Part of this research is also geared toward finding appropriate and creative ways for the Belhaven Visual Arts Department to partner and participate with Operation Mobilization's arts missions program.

The research, reading, and writing of this paper has given me a much greater interest and appreciation for acquiring a more in-depth and broader understanding of history, philosophy, and my own biblical world view. Another project I plan to undertake over the next three years, one that I believe will benefit my growth and that of my students, is the creation of my own illustrated chart/time line blending the developments of history, philosophy, and art into my own original visual aid. I have not been able to find anything along the lines of this that already exists, other than typical generalized

versions of such. What I have in mind would be considerably more elaborate and nuanced than anything else I have seen.

The need to further investigate postmodern philosophy and its ramifications for the discipline of art is absolutely necessary. Several books written from a biblical perspective such as *A Primer on Postmodernism*, by Stanley J. Grenz, *The Universe Next Door*, by James W. Sire, and *Art and Soul*, by Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin, have provided much helpful insight in my studies and are all worthy of another reading. The reference notes and bibliographies of these texts also furnish many other potential avenues of research.

From the secular field, *Approaching the End of Art*, by Arthur Danto, and *Postmodernism*, by Eleanor Heartney, have been useful and warrant further study.

There is also no shortage of on-line articles on the subject of postmodern thought. The diversity of opinions on this topic coming out of the evangelical community is quite interesting.

There already exists a healthy dialogue on these topics amongst our faculty and students. I am committed to see that this dialogue continues and grows richer as we prepare young art students to find their artistic voices and to be able to go toe-to-toe with what the secular, postmodern art world throws at them.

And last, but not least, as a Christian art educator I am called not only to teach and model solid biblical and aesthetic thinking, but to abide in Him just as a branch must abide in the vine. Scripture teaches that to be educated truly is to learn wisdom. Becoming wise should be more desirable than any other goal. The incarnate Jesus had

become the living embodiment of wisdom. And then, He tells us to abide in Him, to know Him, to walk with Him in His living presence. He is the goal. Otherwise, we are seeking and abiding in other gods, false identities, our own competencies, amusements, our own agendas and goals. He says that unless we abide in Him, we can do nothing. To neglect or miss this, is to miss the whole ball of wax!

Therefore, in order to be of any useful service to students, the institution, or anyone else, I must be diligent to know Him and let His abiding presence re-shape who I am, into the work of art He wants.

Works Cited:

Brand, Hillary and Adrienne Chaplin. *Art and Soul*. Carlisle: Piquant, 2001.

Campbell, Douglas G. *Seeing*. Lanham: New York, Oxford: UP of America, 2002.

Dyrness, William A. *Visual Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001.

Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Heartney, Eleanor. *Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge, 2001.

Seerveld, Calvin. *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*. Toronto: Toronto Tuppence, 1995.

Sire, James W. *The Universe Next Door*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997.

Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. *State of the Arts*. Wheaton: Crossway, 1991.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Art in Action*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.