



RESURGENCE

The Importance of Understanding Art When Engaging Non-Christians: A Reflection Paper on the Thought of Dr. Francis Schaeffer

L. David Fairchild

There is no better way to understand the basic world view of a period of history than studying its art forms.¹

We read in the book of Acts that God has “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (Acts 17:26). This staggering truth changes everything since it reveals to us that our coming in and going out of this world, along with the place that we live our days, are all determined by God. This gives our work, jobs, hobbies and relationships meaning since God has chosen our existence in this time as opposed to any other. There is a sense of humbling purpose that comforts and emboldens Christians when they begin to see their lives in relation to God’s providential working out of His drama. Yet within this drama, his choice of our “allotted periods” shows us that we are chosen actors and not merely stage props, and we are given a real part in this true story of history. I say this because we often forget that it is God’s choice that we find ourselves existing in this particular period of time as ambassadors in our culture.

I believe that Dr. Francis Schaeffer was right when he said that the best way to understand the basic world view of a period of history is by studying its art forms, and it is because of this observation that I write this paper. My hopes are that we recognize our challenge in finding appropriate vehicles of communication directly connected to our interest, or lack thereof, in works of art produced by those who make up our culture.

If we are to be faithful to the cultural mandate given to us in Genesis 1, we must see that this mandate was and is not limited only to “creeping things” on the face of the earth, but to the entire scope of our existence and the expressions of our life in every conceivable area. This means that our engagement, understanding, and enjoyment of art as part of our culture and time is not optional if we are to see the whole of life under the reign of Christ, especially if our interest is to see this reign extended to the hearts of those we love most.

Dr. Schaeffer said “As evangelical Christians, we have tended to relegate art to the very fringe of life. The rest of human life we feel is more important. Despite our constant talk about the Lordship of Christ, we have narrowed its scope to a very small area of reality. We have misunderstood the concept of the Lordship of Christ over the whole of man and the whole of the universe and have not taken to us the riches that the Bible gives us for ourselves, for our lives, and for our culture.”² This is a powerful statement. It shows the inadequacy of a high view of Christ if that view doesn’t reach the depths of all of mans endeavors, including art. It also hints to us the danger of reducing something we don’t

understand or feel adequate to discuss to a place of irrelevance at best, or something inherently evil at worst.

This difficult truth has challenged evangelical Christians for the last hundred years as we have drifted away from creating and participating, observing and enjoying art, to a place where we rarely discuss art at a thoughtful level. And though the last ten years have been marked by a resurgence of interest in art for arts sake in many emerging contexts, it has yet to produce a better understanding of the worldviews behind this art since it is often pragmatically used as a vehicle to demonstrate awareness without the much needed time and thought necessary to truly understand what our culture believes. As Dr. Schaeffer says "Art tells us quickly and concisely the kind of day in which we live." For those struggling with understanding our culture and its belief system, it seems to me that our fear of art as Christians will only worsen the problem and further remove us from those we are called to reach.

Dr. Schaeffer's words are timely *"There have been periods in the past when Christians understood this better than we have in the last decades. Some years ago when I started to work out a Christian concept of culture, many people considered what I was doing suspect. They felt that because I was interested in intellectual answers, I must not be biblical. But this attitude represents a real poverty. It fails to understand that if Christianity is really true, then it involves the whole man, including his intellect and creativeness. Christianity is not just "dogmatically" true or "doctrinally" true. Rather, it is true to what is there, true in the whole area of the whole man in all of life."*³ The Christian church has subtly become the breeding ground for the most nuanced form of anti-intellectualism. We are perfectly content in our ignorance of man and his intellect and creativeness. This lack of intellectual interest and artistic ignorance is not limited to the Christian, it is culture-wide. Most in our day under the age of 30 don't spend their leisure time and money visiting great art museums or pondering the meaning behind a rich and beautiful poem. Even less are going to plays and working out the message of the performance in ways that cause their thoughts to soar or their hearts to break as they grasp its significance. Is this because of the art produced, or is it because the observer of this art is unable to comprehend what the artist is communicating? Perhaps it is a combination of both, but my interest for this article is not to act as an armchair art critic or give a historical critique of the failure of evangelical leaders, it is to call us to waken from our slumber so that we can be more effective in our articulation of the gospel in a way that those made in the image of God, even if that image is marred, can best understand.

Reaching My Neighbor

If I had a neighbor that was Muslim and I desired to speak to him thoughtfully about what he believed and to see how I can build bridges so that I might speak the Gospel lovingly, I would probably be directed to his sacred works- The Quran and the Hadith. If I were to take on the challenging and yet important task of learning his belief system as expressed in their sacred works, written by their prophet, I would undoubtedly be encouraged by those in the Christian community to learn all that I can so that I might best represent Christ in a way that challenges his faith and demonstrates the truth of the One True God. I might even find my Christian friends purchasing books on Islam from the local Christian bookstore for my aid.

The underlying feeling towards my endeavor would typically be welcomed by the evangelical community and applauded within the reformed community. However, if my neighbor was not really sure what he believed and therefore didn't claim any particular tradition or denomination (which characterizes a large and growing number of Americans), and if he

spoke in ways that seemed to indicate he did not hold to any particular sacred book or writings, how would I then approach him in an apologetic way? How would I best understand his worldview if he is not consciously following a set of religious writings? For many in our time, this is where the evangelical community is stupefied. We have books-a-plenty on Mormonism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, etc., and we have books written on how to dialogue with atheists, but these are not the growing minority. The growing minority seems to be those that consider themselves spiritual, but don't really know why, and are perfectly comfortable with having spiritual notions void of any rational basis, or even at minimum a definition of their spiritual interests.

Does this mean they have no sacred text? Does this mean that these individuals have no prophets? Does this mean that these individuals have no worldview which governs them? Does this mean that these individuals have no preachers to educate them in their faith? Does this mean they have no sanctuary to worship in? No, on the contrary, their prophets, preachers, and cathedrals are found in small towns up to major cities across America. In fact, America is the largest producer and exporter of this type of religious art. This sacred text is produced by the screenwriters. The prophets are the directors. The preachers are the actors. The cathedrals are the movie theaters that take their following faithful tithes as they are given an admission ticket to come and sit for up to three hours or more as they are educated in the message the writer, director, and actors are communicating to them-powerfully, carefully, and thoughtfully.

Men and women under 30 may not have much interest in high art, but their interest in art is nevertheless voracious. In film, they are given the moving paintings, symphonic scores, acting, and guiding story which educates them and affirms for them much of the worldview of their culture.

But the enjoyment of the arts isn't limited to movie theaters. On the way to the theater it is more than likely these individuals were listening to the poets of their day in their CD player or on their iPod. Most of us choose our musical poets which best fit our attitudes and worldview without even realizing it. All the while we are taking in the word and rhythm of a worldview that is repeated for us and which moves us to a place of worship-like euphoria as we chant these hymns long after the music has stopped.

Yet in the scope of apologetics, it seems as if Christians that would so openly support my interest in learning about Joseph Smith or Buddha, might not be as inclined to support my sudden interest in listening to and understanding these forms of art to best understand what my neighbor believes. Perhaps it is for fear that I might actually enjoy these works of art or be influenced by them and begin to question my faith. Perhaps it is because of their discomfort with culture and art which seems so earthy and perhaps even "worldly."

Dualism, Dichotomy, and Plato

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church to give a detailed defense of the physical resurrection because he was dealing with dualistic thought that sought to disregard the physical and material. The Corinthians were immersed in a Greek philosophy called dualism. This philosophy assumed the spiritual was not compatible with the physical. But Paul explains very clearly to these misled Christians that when Christ came to this earth, in his incarnation and resurrection, he laid claim not only to the spiritual realm but to the physical as well. His redemption was not only of spirits but also of bodies and the earth-material things.

If you read a historical overview of philosophy, you notice that Plato was the first Western philosopher to claim that reality is something abstract or ideal. Plato assumed that when you thought of the spiritual world you should never use physical terms, or envision God's presence in the physical world, lest you disrespect his spiritual nature. Plato considered our body and the material world a liability not an asset. He assumed the body was a hindrance that imprisons and opposes the soul.

Yet, according to Scripture, our bodies are more than just shells for our spirits to live in. Our bodies are a good and essential aspect of our being, no matter how much we attempt to spiritualize the physical for fear of slipping into hedonism or materialism, God has created us as physical and spiritual beings and considered His creation "very good." Earth was handmade by God for us. Earth is God's idea and is God's choice as mankind's original and ultimate dwelling place.

Since Plato assumed that the material world was not ideal and even evil, the goal in his philosophy was to be rid of this shell and experience true spiritual freedom. Anything earthly or physical, in his view, was considered bondage. Plato made a substantial philosophical impact that has caused a wake in Christian history. Sadly, many Christians in our day have a similar view of the physical and material world. This dualistic view adopted by the church of Corinth that was creeping into the church at Colossae, and was taught by a handful of early church theologians like a Philo and Origen who greatly admired Plato's philosophy.

Dr. Schaeffer understood the implications of this type of thinking: *The Lordship of Christ over the whole of life means that there are no Platonic areas in Christianity, no dichotomy or hierarchy between the body and the soul. God made the body as well as the soul, and redemption is for the whole man. Evangelicals have been legitimately criticized for often being so tremendously interested in seeing souls get saved and go to Heaven that they have not cared much about the whole man.* Christians have unfortunately followed Philo and Origen in their error of assuming that the material is evil and only the spiritual is good. For the Christian, this leaves art in the category of the material and physical and therefore not as valuable as the spiritual and immaterial. If lived out consistently, this view will never find a reason to engage in culture and its art forms for fear that it will taint the spiritual.

Intellectual Integrity and the Christian

We should strive for intellectual integrity when attempting to understand our culture and we should not fear the questions that might come as a result of our quest to understand our time. Dr. Schaeffer comments: *The ancients were afraid that if they went to the end of the earth, they would fall off and be consumed by dragons. But once we understand that Christianity is true to what is there, including true to the ultimate environment — the infinite, personal God who is really there — then our minds are freed. We can pursue any question and can be sure that we will not fall off the end of the earth. Such an attitude will give our Christianity a strength that it often does not seem to have at the present time.*⁵

What Dr. Schaeffer is saying to us is that we ought not be frightened to pursue intellectual and cultural questions, and thus the expressions of culture (i.e. art), for fear that we might find something that is contrary to our presuppositions. If we do so it is not only intellectually dishonest, it is also bound in mysticism which cares little about reality for the protection of the mystical idea. This type of spirituality has a ring of godly spirituality, yet in reality it is empty and void of true content that acts as the foundation of its intellectual idea. In our quest to be hyper-spiritual, we have unwittingly given intellectual ground in exchange for higher spiritual experiences. The result has led us to intellectual dullness and

therefore cultural irrelevance. If our worldview is truly true, then we should be fearless to question and then demonstrate how Christianity is true in contrast to whatever is false. Our faith is true, and so are many of the questions presented to us by art. If we are unable to answer these questions, who will?

The Christian voice is not thought of seriously in matters of art in our day because we have excused ourselves from the discussion so that we can get to more important spiritual matters- like how quickly can we leave this planet and its culture which makes us so very uncomfortable.

Dr. Schaeffer writes: *This does not mean we simply accept art without thinking about its message. On the contrary, we must think about its message so that we can learn to appreciate art as a work of art, as well as discern how this art either agrees or contradicts the biblical message. As Christians, we must see that just because an artist — even a great artist — portrays a world-view in writing or on canvas, it does not mean that we should automatically accept that worldview. Art may heighten the impact of the world-view — in fact, we can count on this — but it does not make something true. The truth of a world-view presented by an artist must be judged on grounds other than artistic greatness.*⁶

This is certainly an appropriate caution so that we don't find ourselves embracing art purely for the purpose of appearing lucid in matters of culture while being asleep intellectually regarding the worldview this work of art is communicating. We can enjoy art as art, but if we refuse to think through the reasons behind our taste, we are allowing our culturally conditioned preferences fashion our interests rather than our interests conforming to a biblical worldview.

Viewing Art as Art

Yet with these cautions mentioned, we can easily cross the line in thinking about a work of art too much and missing its beauty. By saying that we should think about what we enjoy and how we view art, we should note that this does not mean we should over analyze art and make it a stale experiment in abstract thought. Dr. Schaeffer mentions this: *Many modern artists, it seems to me, have forgotten the value that art has in itself. Much modern art is far too intellectual to be great art. I am thinking, for example, of such an artist as Jasper Johns. Many modern artists do not see the distinction between man and non-man, and it is a part of the lostness of modern man that they no longer see value in the work of art as a work of art. I am afraid, however, that as evangelicals we have largely made the same mistake. Too often we think that a work of art has value only if we reduce it to a tract. This too is to view art solely as a message for the intellect.*⁷

Art is not to be thought of as only a means to an intellectual end. If our desire to speak to non-Christians cause us to rethink how we engage non-Christians at a level they understand, by discussing things they enjoy (like art), we must not turn such pursuits into manipulative attempts to develop affinity, when in reality we have no interest and little enjoyment in their choice of art aside from its pragmatic use for us to speak as if we understand them. One can feign a love for jazz, but once you speak with someone who really loves jazz, you'll be found out to be an imposter and lose any credibility with them. It's better to be aware of your own discomfort with their art and discuss this discomfort then it is to pretend you are accepting, while really disdaining their choice of art.

Accepting Stylistic Differences

One thing our culture desperately desires is honesty and authenticity. Knowing this, we should guard against the ever tempting pull to betray our artistic preferences by adopting

another's preference so that we will be viewed as "one of them." The pressure to do so when applying a cultural apologetic is great. Our integrity as Christians should cause us to view differences in our preferences with the non-Christian as challenging but not insurmountable. We must realize the importance of demonstrating our seriousness in considering art often begins with being faithful to what we enjoy and learning much about it first, so that we can see common threads and points of difference with those who may not enjoy what we enjoy. Dr. Schaeffer comments on differences in preferred style when he says: *Many Christians, especially those unused to viewing the arts and thinking about them, reject contemporary painting and contemporary poetry not because of their world-view, but simply because they feel threatened by a new art form. It is perfectly legitimate for a Christian to reject a particular work of art intellectually — that is, because he knows what is being said by it. But it is another thing to reject the work of art simply because the style is different from that which we are used to. In short: Styles of art form change, and there is nothing wrong with this.*⁸ If this is true, then we should feel free to enjoy one art form over another without the need to make excuses for our preferences, or the need to reject the stylistic preference of another. This frees us to explore much more in our conversations with the non-Christian because we are not locked into a bitter style feud. We can acknowledge the differences and move on to the worldview these works are communicating, which is far more important.

Enjoying Art to the Glory of God

As Christians seeking a better understanding of art and how we should think about it, we must remind ourselves that art is not a tool to be used in apologetics to get something. It is a thing to be enjoyed and pondered, and through that enjoyment and thought, we will find plenty to discuss with those who also find it enjoying or interesting. Dr. Schaeffer suggested: *"The arts and the sciences do have a place in the Christian life — they are not peripheral. For a Christian, redeemed by the work of Christ and living within the norms of Scripture and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the Lordship of Christ should include an interest in the arts. A Christian should use these arts to the glory of God — not just as tracts, but as things of beauty to the praise of God. An art work can be a doxology in itself."*⁹ This is profoundly important for the Christian to see. As Christians, we have the liberty to fully enjoy art as a way to glorify God.

Platonism frowns upon the pleasures of the physical world, mistaking asceticism for spirituality, Scripture says we are to put our hope not in material things but "in God, who richly provides us with everything for enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). If he provides everything for enjoyment, we shouldn't feel guilty for enjoying it, should we? God isn't displeased when we enjoy a good meal, marital sex, football game, a cozy fire, or a book. He's not up in heaven frowning at us and saying, "Stop it-you should find joy in me." This would be just foreign to God's nature as our heavenly Father as it would be to mine as an earthly father if I gave my daughters a Christmas gift and started pouting because they enjoyed it. No, I gave the gift to bring joy to them and to me-if they don't take pleasure in it, I'd be disappointed. Their pleasure in my gift to them draws them closer to me. I am delighted that they enjoy the gift. Every day we should see God in his creation: in the food we eat, the air we breathe, the friendships we enjoy, and the pleasures of family, work, and hobbies. Yes, we must sometimes forgo secondary pleasures, and we should never let them eclipse God. But we should thank God for all of life's joys, large and small, and allow them to draw us to him. I take this to mean art as well.

For many of us these attitudes towards art and culture must be taught since they are so foreign to our experience and religious upbringing. The effort is well worth it however, as we begin to see life and all things in different ways. As we begin to see Christ's reign over

all of life it staggers us. As we begin to see value in God's creation- the material world- it grounds us. As we begin to enjoy art it liberates us from the bondage of legalism. As we begin to think more deeply about the culture in which we live, and its world view, art will confound us less and less. As we speak with honesty about our own fears and stylistic biases regarding art, we will notice an appreciation for works that previously made us uncomfortable. And as we intentionally begin the process of learning more about art and its messages, we will simultaneously learn about what drives those who produce the work as well as those who enjoy it.

We need this kind of world view education. We need to learn how to exegete our culture in such a way that we are able to effectively draw out the intended meaning of the multitude of messages we encounter daily. As Dr. Schaeffer taught us, it is art that will be the best educator of our culture's world view at this point of history.

Since art is both enjoyable and educating, and communicates a message about itself and about the world that it was created in, we should pray that more and more the Christian community will see the need to engage the arts as the primary way to speak intelligently and truthfully to those who are made in God's image.

Francis Schaeffer pioneered this type of artistic critical thinking in the Christian community in the 20th century as he wrote much about the arts and its many forms. His contribution is felt to this day because he genuinely loved God and that spilled out into affection for man in his lost condition. The greatest thanks to God, and honor to Dr. Francis Schaeffer, is to follow in Dr. Schaeffer's steps and take the time to learn about the world in which we live and the people that live in it.

I am blessed to have read Dr. Schaeffer's works and realize the glaring inadequacy of any attempt to summarize and nutshell what he would tell us today regarding culture and art in apologetics. But I pray the effort for each of us to grasp at what he was aiming, might at the very least bring us to a better understanding of God and the mission he has called each of us to.

¹Schaeffer, F. A. 1951. *The Bible Today: The Christian and Modern Art*. March 1951

²Schaeffer, F. A. 1996, c1982. *The complete works of Francis A. Schaeffer : A Christian worldview*. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

³Schaeffer, F. A. 1996, c1982. *The complete works of Francis A. Schaeffer : A Christian worldview*. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

⁴Schaeffer, F. A. 1996, c1982. *The complete works of Francis A. Schaeffer : A Christian worldview*. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

⁵Schaeffer, F. A. 1996, c1982. *The complete works of Francis A. Schaeffer : A Christian worldview*. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

⁶Schaeffer, F. A. 1996, c1982. *The complete works of Francis A. Schaeffer : A Christian worldview*. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

⁷Schaeffer, F. A. 1996, c1982. *The complete works of Francis A. Schaeffer : A Christian worldview*. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

⁸Schaeffer, F. A. 1996, c1982. *The complete works of Francis A. Schaeffer : A Christian worldview*. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

⁹Schaeffer, F. A. 1996, c1982. *The complete works of Francis A. Schaeffer : A Christian worldview*. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

¹⁰Alcorn, Randy, 2004 *Heaven*, Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Wheaton, Illinois