

critique

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CRITIQUE



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ABOUT CRITIQUE: Critique is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Letters from The House Between* (formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*), a newsletter by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

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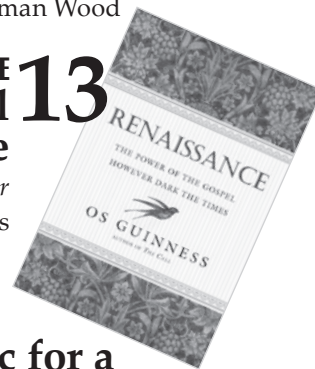
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A Thread in the Tapestry God Weaves



At the heart of our vision in Ransom Fellowship is the conviction that our primary calling as Christians is to be faithful in the ordinary of our lives, whatever that ordinary consists of. It may be plumbing a house, or raising a child, or preaching the gospel, or researching some arcane topic, or caring for the ill, or painting a canvas that no one—absolutely *no one* but God—sees. Still, it is significant because it is God’s calling to me, and that matters more than the cultural metrics of success or failure, because he is the one who can choose to say “Well done” someday, and all else pales into insignificance besides that, which is a value of the kingdom of God that is simply a given in the Christian faith.

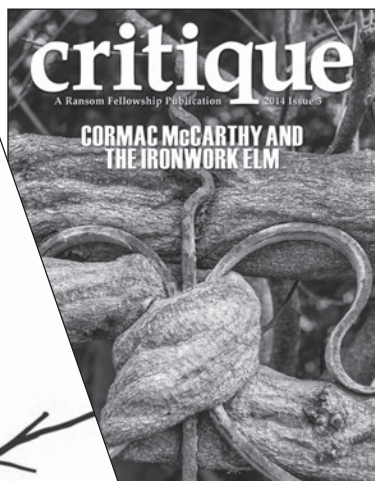
Os Guinness expresses it this way: “As people of faith, we are each to follow our calling to the maximum of our abilities and to the full extent of our lives, living to the glory of God and with an eye to our neighbor’s needs. It is not up to us to save and manage the world, especially in the global era, for trying to do so will end up either in windy abstractions or in the paralysis that comes from being overwhelmed.... Our task is to focus on our individual callings in engaging with the world, to trust that others are following theirs too, and to leave to God the masterminding of the grand outcome” (*Renaissance*, p. 107–108). Edith Schaeffer used to refer to the outcome God is masterminding as a tapestry. We each have a thread to weave in, and our separate threads are interwoven into a whole under Christ’s lordship.

One part of my ordinary involves completing a book on this topic, unpacking the shape of Christian faithfulness for ordinary believers in our pluralistic, secularized world. I’ve engaged these

ideas for over three decades and now am trying to distill what I’ve learned and make it more widely accessible.

Most of the time we cannot see how our separate threads intersect and interact. Keeping on keeping on involves trusting God, a walk by faith not sight. And then occasionally we catch a small glimpse of the interwoven nature of our faithfulness before God. The threads you weave in prayer and giving to Ransom Fellowship have a direct impact on my writing—as God grants creativity, focus, and the ability to continue.

I’ll always remember 2014 as the year when we have sensed the gentle sustaining power of the Holy Spirit as we’ve moved from Rochester to Savage, from Toad Hall to The House Between. We’ve noticed surprising opportunities develop for conversations about things that matter, especially with young adults and the thriving art community in the Twin Cities. Giving usually tapers down over the summer months, and this year it tapered even more than usual and has not risen back to normal levels. We don’t know what that means for any of the threads involved, though we realize we need to make some hard choices as a result. What we can say is that for over 35 years God, through his people, has graciously provided the funds for us to pursue this work—something we know will not continue forever—and we hope this fact serves as a quiet demonstration that God exists, and can be trusted as we follow our callings by being faithful in the ordinary, whatever our ordinary happens to be. ■



To the editor:

Thank you so much for your continued efforts producing *Critique*. I find it an invaluable resource, inspiring many personal study tangents. In *Critique* 2014:2, your article "Ravens, Considered" reminded me of a thought-provoking devotional I read a couple of months ago. So—for your thoughts:

From Hebrew/Aramaic scholar Chaim Bentorah, who received his BA from Moody Bible Institute in Jewish studies and his MA from Denver Seminary in Old Testament and Hebrew. He is presently working on his PhD in biblical archeology. His dissertation is on the "Esoteric Structure of the Hebrew Alphabet."

From an online devotional, 12/14/2012 (www.chaimbentorah.com/2012/12/devotional-1kings-177):

...We learn that God provided him [Elijah] with food from ravens. That is a little strange considering ravens are not kosher. Doves could have done the job just as well. Taking a closer look at this word for ravens, avarim, we find that it could just as easily be rendered "The Arabians." The Masorites

decided on a vowel pointing that renders this as ravens and the church, for whatever reason,

ran with this rendering for the last 1700 years.

But it would make more sense to render this as Arabians. If it were the Arabians who fed Elijah, they probably sat around listening to his teachings and spread these teachings throughout the land. This widow woman may have heard the teachings and prayed to God and God sent his prophet to her to care for her and her son....

Ginger
Via e-mail

Denis Haack responds:

Thanks for writing, Ginger, and for your kind words. I had not heard of Chaim Bentorah, am glad to know of his work, and it was interesting to read his interpretation of the 1 Kings story.

Bentorah's devotional exemplifies an approach to biblical interpretation that is common among many evangelical Protestants. This hermeneutic essentially limits the interpretive process to the individual and their Bible. The more historically orthodox hermeneutic, however, taught and exemplified, for example, by Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, insists that the long tradition of biblical teaching of the community of interpreters in the church is essential to the process. This is rooted in apostolic authority—St. Paul teaches us that it is the Holy Spirit that gives gifts to the church, including that of teaching (1 Corinthians 12:4, 8-11), an unpacking of Jesus' promise that when the Spirit indwells the church he will lead her "into all the truth" as "the Spirit of truth" (John 16:13). We do not need to

assume the teaching ministry of the church over the centuries is infallible to realize that this teaching tradition must nevertheless be taken with great seriousness. To be dismissive of the teaching of the church is to be dismissive of the Holy Spirit's work in history. What this means for hermeneutics is that the proper interpretation of Scripture is never left to individuals alone, regardless of their fluency in biblical languages or whether their speculations seem attractive or their role or influence in the believing community.

In the case of the 1 Kings story, the traditional understanding, as Bentorah notes, is that the birds fed Elijah, not Arabians. This understanding is, as far as I can tell, unbroken in two millennia of church teaching (and in the ancient Jewish rabbinic tradition). The fact we do not know the reason for this tradition is irrelevant. That being the case, I would say Elijah was fed by ravens.

To the editor:

I write in response to Steven Faulkner's comments on McCarthy's novels. In short, I don't get it. McCarthy is not a Christian but leans towards Christian themes? He is spiritual. Or "spiritual?" Part of what I struggle with is something I find common in much of the art world, both secular and sacred: the focus on the aesthetic. So, McCarthy has "arresting landscapes" or "vivid writing." Great. What is he doing with that writing, with those aesthetic tools? According to Faulkner and the critics he cites, McCarthy has written, at one time or another, jumpy narratives, savage violence, and of course, the part that seems to impress Faulkner, religious issues. But what is good about the thoughts McCarthy puts out there about those religious issues? I have not read McCarthy. One of the reasons

I read reviews, which is mostly what Faulkner has written, is so I can have an idea as to the value of what it is that I may read. I'm not sure I want to spend time reading novels that have vague concepts that are, or sort of are, related to Christian values and ideas. Writes Faulkner in his conclusion: "He certainly does not present himself openly as a writer of Christian convictions, but he seems beset by issues of Christian faith. For years he has been drawing strong contrasts between good and evil, grace and greed, faith and nihilism.... In a literary culture where these arguments have largely been shelved, this is something that matters." What is McCarthy's answer to those arguments? Truth and wisdom? Do his novels direct the unreached to the Gospel or encourage believers? I wish that Faulkner provided more justification as to why Christians ought to read McCarthy, why his writing, and explorations of those arguments, matters.

Rod Miller

Professor of Art History

Hendrix College (Conway, AR)

Denis Haack responds:

I appreciate you taking the time to write, Rod. As you know, Steven Faulkner did not write his essay for Critique, but for Touchstone, where I read it and requested permission to publish it. Since I thought it exactly right for Critique, I should respond to your letter.

No doubt you could find numerous pieces in Critique that call attention to books (or films and music) that do not "direct the unreached to the Gospel or encourage believers." If anything, we exist to actively challenge the notion that Christians should limit their reading to fiction that fits that description.

Having read all of McCarthy's books, I think Faulkner is correct to catch "signs of embedded grace" in McCarthy's "dark novels." To miss these signs is, I believe, to miss what a Christian imagination—as equally needful as a Christian mind—must be intentionally fine-tuned to discover and cherish. Just as a Christian mind cannot be honed by remaining in a Christian ghetto, so a Christian imagination will remain shriveled if it is not actively exercised to identify glimpses of glory in a fallen world. In so doing, God's glory becomes increasingly precious just as seeing tiny flowers, planted by unbelievers, blooming in dank shadows of a wood take on an added poignancy in their beauty from their setting.

Growing to maturity in Christ is not limited to some esoteric spiritual sphere hermetically sealed off from the rest of life, but embraces us as whole persons, body and soul. The mature in Christ, then, have grown not merely in demonstrating the gifts of the spirit, a transformed mind and a life shaped by the biblical view of reality, but also in every other aspect of life, including aesthetics. To elevate the aesthetic to a place of primacy is of course a dangerous error, but that must not deter us from receiving aesthetic excellence as a good gift, whether the artist worships the true God or not, or publishes for reasons for which we approve or not. Just as all truth is God's truth, so all beauty is God's.

In an increasingly pluralistic world, it is insufficient to merely know about the disparate worldviews that animate our neighbors, as if identifying a series of bullet point ideas will capture all we need to know. To treat our neighbors with true dignity as created in God's image we need to find ways

to inhabit those worldviews, without giving up our own deepest heart commitments, if we hope to share our lives and the gospel in a way that will prove plausible. One way to do this is through art. A worldview always feels and looks very different from the inside. This is the sort of compassion that exemplified my mentor, Francis Schaeffer, and what drew me to him.

So although, as Faulkner notes, McCarthy "does not present himself openly as a writer of Christian convictions," his fiction demonstrates a commitment to story, reality, and a gifted pursuit of excellence in his craft. In his novels, McCarthy "has been drawing strong contrasts between good and evil, grace and greed, faith and nihilism," Faulkner notes. "In a literary culture where these arguments have largely been shelved, this is something that matters." I agree. This should impact how we talk about the literary culture of our world. And as more of our neighbors read McCarthy and as films are produced based on his novels, we are granted windows of insight into our world and points of contact to talk about the things that truly matter. And that, which lies at the heart of what we mean by Christian discernment, is what we hope to demonstrate and encourage by publishing articles like Faulkners' in Critique. ■

Comment on the covers: Our life tapestry, the ordinary of our lives, is a rich jumble of stuff: things thrust upon us and things we've chosen, things that corrupt and things that delight. Unless our eyes are wide open to examine it all, we can't understand our culture or love our neighbor—or ourselves.

— Karen Coulter Perkins, designer

Technology: What's Gained and What's Lost?

In an article titled “How You’ll Get Organized,” James Fallows asked five technology experts “to speculate about the future of personal-information technology, especially whether the race for mastery of one’s own data might someday seem winnable” (*The Atlantic*, July/August 2014; 30, 32). The five technology experts, not surprisingly, are optimistic about what technology will bring. “We’ve been through the worst,” they believe. “The next stage in information technology will put people back in control, or closer to it.”

If that forecast turns out to be true,

it would be a welcome development. Almost everyone I know who uses technology, and that is everyone, tends to express some sense of feeling out of control. Whether it’s too many e-mails or too many texts or too many social media platforms or too many programs instituting changes we don’t want or like or too much pressure to keep up with too much, many of us feel, at least occasionally, that somehow the technology that was supposed to be our servant and make things easier and more efficient has somehow gotten out of hand. “All of a sudden, we’ve lost a lot of control,” Steve Wozniak has said. “We can’t turn off our Internet; we can’t turn off our smart phones; we can’t turn off our computers. You used to ask a smart person a question. Now, who do you ask? It starts with g-o, and it’s not God.”

In any case, whether or not we share

the experts’ optimism about where things are headed in the next few years, Fallows’ piece provides an opportunity to pause and reflect on the impact these various technologies have in our lives, for blessing or for curse. Consider, for example, the two brief paragraphs in which Fallows and his experts address what they refer to as “the e-mail nightmare.”

E-mail is indispensable, and unendurable. That is because it does not scale. Every message, as Esther Dyson has written, “represents a task—something to read, a query to answer, a meeting to schedule, a bill to pay, a request to fulfill or deny.” Thus senders can generate more tasks than recipients could possibly perform. As she told me, “The reader’s time is free to the sender, which is a huge market inefficiency.”

Dyson says that some market mechanism



will reset the balance. One way or another, senders will pay a premium for recipients' time and attention—as they did in the pre-e-mail days, by having to request appointments or make sales calls or, at the very least, pay for postage. Phil Libin says improved filtering systems are already solving the problem. “I have 100,000 e-mails I haven’t answered,” he said. “I know that I can’t even open 90 percent of the e-mail I get. Am I missing something important I should see? Sure, but rarely.” The remaining challenge is to reduce “the error rate”—that is, the share of important e-mails that he does miss. And this, Libin said, should be “an easily solvable” problem, with the help of systems that learn whom he wants to hear from, and whom he doesn’t.

It would be wise to remember this is

not a new topic for conversation. Every advance in technology tends to generate concerns as well as delight. Bringing torches and candles into our dwelling places made it possible to see after dark, and they also increased the risk of fire that could snuff out lives. Cell phones allow us to be more available to those we love, as well as more easily interrupted when we need to be left alone for a few hours.

As life changes, we must respond if we want to live intentionally, or be swept along if we aren’t vigilant. Okay, that’s too stark—to some extent we all find ourselves swept along. Things happen too quickly, events overtake us, time

flies by so unrelentingly, change creeps up on us, and being finite we can only pay close attention to so much before we are overwhelmed, too distracted to keep up with the things that must be done if we are to survive. So, perhaps the more accurate image is that of being swept along in the river of a technological society where occasionally we find ourselves caught for a few moments in a little eddy near the shore. Here, in this little shelter from the current we can reflect, and be better able to live intentionally as a result when we push back out into the stream.

However we arrive in the temporary quiet spot that allows us to take the measure of things shaping our life, we find we are in a place of grace. A place where thoughtful yet probing questions can help us see with greater clarity, and to shine a bit of comprehension on things that seem to exist in the shadows. ■

(See next page for discussion questions.)



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Every advance in technology also brings some unintended consequence that may not be quite as welcome, though it is not always noticed. "Technology," C.P. Snow noted in *The New York Times* (March 15, 1971), "is a queer thing. It brings you great gifts with one hand, and it stabs you in the back with the other." For example, central heating transformed the quality of life for those of us who live in Minnesota. However, it also did away with the chores of cutting, splitting, storing, and stoking wood that traditionally were performed by fathers and their sons. What was gained and lost in this particular technological advance?
2. Do the same gain/lost analysis for other technological advances that shape the contours of our lives: land lines to cell phones; snail letters to e-mail; photo albums/postcards to Facebook. What other technologies should be subjected to the same process?
3. Do you ever take sabbaticals from technology? Are they partial sabbaticals or complete? How, how often, and why do you do this? What do you gain and lose in the experience?
4. The experts with whom James Fallows consulted were optimistic about what was ahead. "I am not being naïve," says Phil Libin, CEO of Evernote. "But the long arc of technology bends towards the more awesome." More specifically, they are optimistic that future advances in technology will solve the problems generated by today's technology. What good reasons could we give to support this optimism? If future technology, like all technology, brings both gain and loss, what does this suggest for the future technology that solves today's technological unintended consequences?
5. How do you handle the crush of e-mail? Are you satisfied with your approach? Why or why not?
6. How do you handle the pressure to keep updated on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media? Are you satisfied with your approach? Why or why not?
7. How do you handle the interminable interruption of your cell phone? Are you satisfied with your approach? Why or why not?
8. At the heart of the effort in advancing technology is the promise that it will increase our personal freedom, our leisure time, our efficiency, and our availability. To what extent has this promise been met? What unintended consequences have resulted?
9. What is the difference between technological progress and human flourishing? How might the two advance or hinder one another?
10. "Western society has accepted as unquestionable," social critic Lewis Mumford said, "a technological imperative that is quite as arbitrary as the most primitive taboo: not merely the duty to foster invention and to constantly create technological novelties, but equally the duty to surrender to these novelties unconditionally, just because they are offered, without respect to their human consequences." To what extent do you agree? What does this suggest for the discerning Christian who wants to live an intentionally faithful life?
11. A Christian is someone who has sworn allegiance to Christ as king, against all gods and kings and things that might seek to take his place. "My wish," Wendell Berry says in *The Art of the Commonplace*, "simply is to live my life as fully as I can. In both our work and our leisure, I think, we should be so employed. And in our time this means that we must save ourselves from the products that we are asked to buy in order, ultimately, to replace ourselves." What might he mean?
12. What does this discussion suggest for your life? What plans should you make? How can we, in Christian community, better help one another live faithfully in a technological society?



Discernment 101c: Liking It, or Getting It

In an increasingly pluralistic and technological world like ours, hardly a week goes past without the possibility of being confronted with some new artifact of popular culture. It may be a new band, a new television series, or a new film—and often we are introduced to whatever it is by someone who thinks it's great. "Listen to this song," they'll say enthusiastically. "What do you think?"

We usually assume they are really asking, "Do you like it?" They may even ask us if we like it. Which may produce an awkward pause. We hesitate because we don't want to hurt their feelings, but the hesitation tells them all they need to know.

At this point I want to speak to members of my own tribe, namely to Christians. And what I want to say is this: it doesn't matter if we like it or not. What matters is whether we get it.

The most difficult task in a pluralistic world is not learning about the various and diverse worldviews that inform the lives, minds, and hearts of our neighbors. True, learning about them takes time and effort in our busy world, but loving our neighbor and serving our Lord requires us to make that investment. More difficult is finding a way to imaginatively inhabit our neighbor's worldview so we can see life and reality from within it. To walk, for a few moments, in the proverbial shoes of the other person, which allows us a glimpse of the yearnings, ideas, values, dreams, hopes, and fears that animate them.

Art in general, and popular culture in particular, can act like a window of insight into the heart and soul of our neighbors. If I am to follow my Lord, Christ, into the world, I must not squander the chance to see through that window because I don't happen to like something. Seen from this perspective, in fact, allowing my likes and dislikes into the conversation is nothing less than a supreme act of selfishness. My neighbor is made in God's image, so they must be treated with dignity, which means that I will want to get—comprehend, appreciate, receive, embrace, imaginatively inhabit—what seems to resonate in their soul.

I am not advocating a technique to allow better conversations and deeper relationships, though I think both are at stake. I am suggesting something far deeper, and that is this: in such encounters,

the Christian should put the other person ahead of themselves, always and in every way. It's a transformation of perspective in which the conversation is turned upside down. Even if my friend asks me if I like it, I will act as if the vital thing is that they like it, and that I'd like nothing more than to share in their delight.

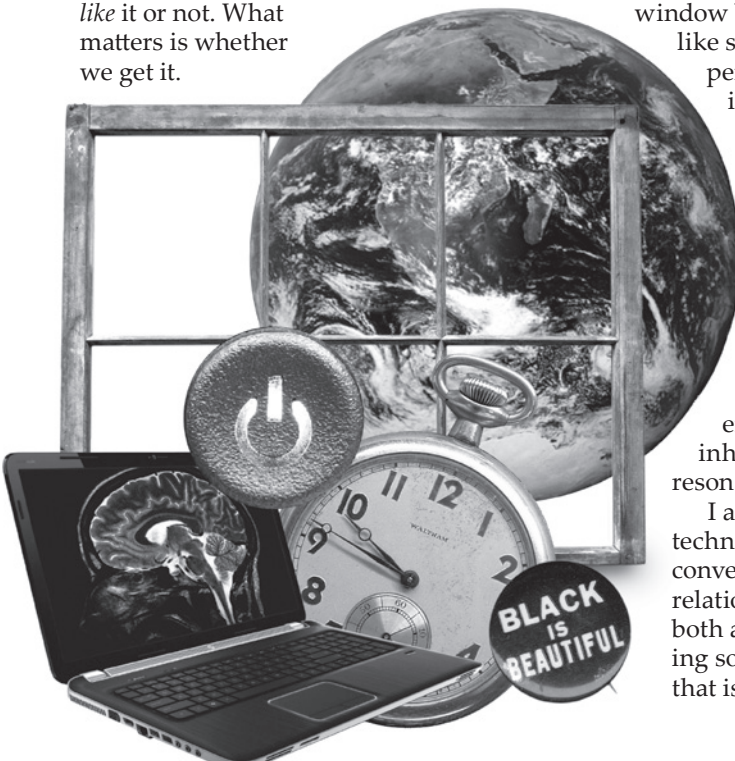
This immediately suggests all sorts of things I can say when my neighbor asks me what I think or whether I like it. How did you discover it? What do you hear (see)? What does it say to you? How did you feel when you first heard (saw) it? This is so fascinating—tell me about it. What do you know about the musician (band, director)? And so on.

One of the greatest gifts I can give in our overly busy world is a winsome eagerness to be in a conversation where my likes and dislikes do not dominate. A conversation in which I grant you the dignity that comes from truly hearing you.

I am not suggesting that this will necessarily be the full extent of the conversation. There are honest questions that can be raised to take the conversation to deeper levels. Why does this speak to you so deeply? What reasons would you give for believing this message is true?

Still, I would argue it is the place to begin. After all, my not liking something may be my problem, while my getting it is my calling. ■

This brief piece expands on "Discernment 101: An explanation of discernment" on Ransom's website.



DARKENED ROOM: *THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL*

THE SINGULAR V WES ANDERSON



VISION OF

In 1932, Europe found itself in a time of profound change. While it had survived World War I, the Treaty of Versailles left the world radically altered. The Allies took old empires from the East and West, empires that produced the “civilized world,” and transformed them into new organizations called nation states. This precarious, 1932 world—a world between the old “civilized” empire and the new modern world—is the setting of Wes Anderson’s most recent comedy *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

At the center of the film is Monsieur Gustave H. (Ralph Fiennes), the foppish, commanding, and flamboyant concierge at the height of the Grand Budapest Hotel’s fame, a height reminiscent of the grandeur, wealth, and refinement of the old empires. His protégé and eventual best friend is the newly minted lobby boy at the hotel, Zero Mustafa (Tony Revolori). Gustave not only keeps the hotel in its finest working order, but he also fulfills the desires of an endless cadre of women, women as old and wealthy as the hotel itself. When one of these women, the aged Madame D. (Tilda Swinton), dies under mysterious circumstances, Gustave and Zero travel to her funeral and surprisingly discover that she has left the concierge a priceless painting, van Hoyt’s *Boy with Apple*. However, the family’s oldest son, Dimitri (Adrian Brody), is unwilling to relinquish the painting. When Gustave and Zero decide to take it anyway, Dimitri accuses Gustave of murdering Madame D. Gustave ends up in prison, but he eventually escapes and, with Zero’s help, has his name cleared, recovers the painting, and garners much more in the process.

Like Anderson’s recent work, *Grand Budapest Hotel* presents a marvelous visual display of an enchanting story. And like his other films, this film might also be thought of as an attempt to recover the contours of a lost world, a world that could be more civilized and refined than our own. M. Gustave’s character embodies this very attempt. His nostalgia is best captured in a phrase he utters after police officer Heckels (Edward Norton) shows an undue kindness. “You see,” he comments to Zero, “there are still faint glimmers of civilization left in this barbaric slaughter house that was once known as humanity.” Though humanity has lost itself to savagery after the war, some of that old, civilized world endures. For all of the admiration that Zero bestows on Gustave, Zero knows that the concierge’s nostalgia is a bit out of place. Toward the end of the film, an aged Zero admits that the world M. Gustave embodies “vanished long before he ever entered it. But I will say, he certainly sustained the illusion with a marvelous grace.”

This sustained illusion is one of the key pleasures the film offers, mainly through humor, dated cinematic techniques, and a highly orchestrated visual space. Much of the film’s humor comes from Gustave’s use of language. It embodies the old world but only half-remembered—his language juxtaposes refinement and vulgarity. For example, when Gustave shows *Boy with Apple* to

by Naaman Wood



Zero for the first time, the concierge gestures toward the painting. Zero holds a cup of milk. Gustave speaks with poise and erudition. "This is van Hoyt's exquisite portrayal of a beautiful boy on the cusp of manhood. Blonde, smooth skin as white as that milk; of impeccable provenance; one of the last in private hands, and unquestionably the best. It's a masterpiece," he glances around at the other paintings, "the rest of this shit is worthless junk." There are similar linguistic and visual juxtapositions throughout the film.

In addition to Gustave's language, the film uses old cinematic techniques to display Gustave's lost world. The majority of *Grand Budapest Hotel* uses an older, squarish aspect ratio prominent during the earliest days of cinema: the silent era and the golden age of Hollywood.



A dated aspect ratio and heavily shadowed edges in the silent film, Intolerance

Where most of television and film now appears in a more rectangular, widescreen aspect ratio, the older format harkens back to an out of fashion way of seeing cinema.



Contemporary wide-screen aspect ratio in The Dark Knight



Outdated aspect ratio, gently shadowed edges, in Grand Budapest Hotel

(Note: The film uses several different kinds of aspect ratios. Check especially the beginning and ending of the film).

The film also uses two obsolete film techniques, specifically from the silent era: shadowed edges and iris effects. Prominent in films like D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, Anderson uses shadowed edges in a way consistent with some silent films, at a heartwarming scene—the scene where Gustave offends Zero and then apologizes. Similarly, iris effects usually appeared in silent films at a moment in which directors wanted to draw attention to a particular aspect of a scene, as in this moment from D.W. Griffith's controversial film, *Birth of a Nation*. A similar technique appears in various scenes of *Grand Budapest*, not the least of which is the revelation of Gustave at the height of his power.



Iris effect in Birth of a Nation



Iris effect in Grand Budapest Hotel

Aside from dated film techniques, the film also attempts to sustain the illusion of a lost world through one particular visual practice: a visual space mapped at right angles. For example, the camera gazes on a world that moves perpendicular or parallel to the camera and its background. Within that world, figures appear at the center of the frame and travel parallel or perpendicular to the background and the camera's lens.



Characters move directly toward camera, perpendicular to background and lens



Characters gaze parallel to background and lens



Characters look and move directly away from camera, perpendicular to background and the lens

By way of assessment, Anderson's work displays at least two virtues, and these virtues can offer some unexpected theological suggestions to evangelical Christians. First, the film admires and uses so-called outdated cinematic techniques, like iris effects, shadowed edges, and squarish aspect ratios with great effect. If Anderson found the earliest film directors helpful, then we might find the earliest Christians helpful, those Christians known as the church fathers and mothers. What D.W. Griffith was to Anderson, so might Irenaeus, Athanasius, or Gregory of Nyssa be to us. What insights church fathers and mothers might yield is an open question; however, if Anderson's film suggests that contemporary stories can be told with forgotten techniques, then we may do well to listen intently to Christians whom we have forgotten.

Second, the film displays a remarkable degree of discipline and carefulness. The meticulously mapped world is not only clever but also impeccably constructed. Where Anderson thinks and sees with cinematic discipline, evangelicals might struggle to think and act with a commensurate theological discipline. Sadly, we tend to avoid such discipline. We tend to move too quickly to conclusions, and we tend to gloss over the complexities and nuances of scripture and the world in which we live. Moreover, we tend to place too little value on the hurt that Christians have caused others, precisely because we

have been neither disciplined nor careful with our thoughts and action.

If these are the theological lessons we can learn from the film, there is at least one warning, particularly for the way we imagine redemption and resurrection. Although the film has a highly ordered visual space, Christians should resist a view of redemption or resurrection that is too highly ordered. Jesus' own body bears witness to an alternative economy—redemption and resurrection meets us with gruesome scars. John's gospel is most adamant about this reality. When Thomas hears about Jesus' resurrection, he claims, "I will never believe," until "I place my finger *into* the mark of the nails, and place my hand *into* his side" (author's emphasis, John 20:25 ESV). Thomas' word "*into*" makes a terrifying suggestion. Jesus' nail prints were likely large enough to surround the disciple's finger, and the gash in his side might have enveloped Thomas' hand. Resurrection is redemption for John. God raised Jesus' body from the grave, and his body can do remarkable things, like enter locked rooms. But it is a resurrection that does not disdain gruesome scars. When we imagine redemption, it is important that we

imagine it like John does—a resurrection that embraces and displays brokenness. Too much order might neglect the reality of Jesus' body.

Unlike *Grand Budapest Hotel*, empires and nation states ended up having much in common, not the least of which was violence of brutal and cataclysmic proportion, even for all the common good they produced. In this regard, Christians do well to resist Gustave's nostalgia for lost worlds. Those worlds are just as fallen as ours. Knowing that, we can, I think, delight in *Grand Budapest Hotel's* wonderful illusion and embrace its important insights. ■

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Naaman Wood has received degrees in rhetoric and cinema from Regent University and in theology and New Testament from Duke Divinity School. He loves strange theater, arty films, challenging television, bold music, and a good drink.

Credits for *The Grand Budapest Hotel*

Starring:

Ralph Fiennes (M. Gustave)
F. Murray Abraham (Mr. Moustafa)
Mathieu Amalric (Serge X)
Adrien Brody (Dmitri)
Willem Dafoe (Jopling)
Jeff Goldblum (Deputy Kovacs)
Harvey Keitel (Ludwig)
Jude Law (Young Writer)
Bill Murray (M. Ivan)
Edward Norton (Henckels)
Jason Schwartzman (M. Jean)
Tilda Swinton (Madame D)
Tom Wilkinson (Author)
Owen Wilson (M. Chuck)

Directed and written by: Wes Anderson

Produced by: Wes Anderson and others

Cinematography by: Alexandre Desplat

U.S.A.; 2014; 1 hour 40 minutes (100 minutes)
Rated R (language, some sexual content and violence)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. What was your initial reaction to the film? Why do you think you responded that way?
2. The review mentioned some cinematic techniques in the film: multiple aspect ratios, iris effects, shadowed edges. If you noticed them, how did you respond to them? Did you think they aided or distracted from the story? Why or why not?
3. In what ways were other film-making techniques (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across and to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
4. How did you react to the film's use of humor? In particular, what did you think of the film's use of vulgarity? Was it offensive or attractive? Why? Are there bad and good uses of humor? Why do you think so?
5. The reviewer seemed to delight in Anderson's clever and precise compositions. Did you feel similarly? Why or why not? Did anything else delight you in the film?
6. *Making better use of older traditions:* Have you ever seen any silent films? If so, which one(s)? What did you think? Most people find silent films difficult to watch. Why do you think so? Have you ever read any of the church fathers/mothers? If so, which one(s)? What did you think? Most people find the church fathers/mothers difficult to read. Why do you think so? After watching *Grand Budapest*, do you think there might

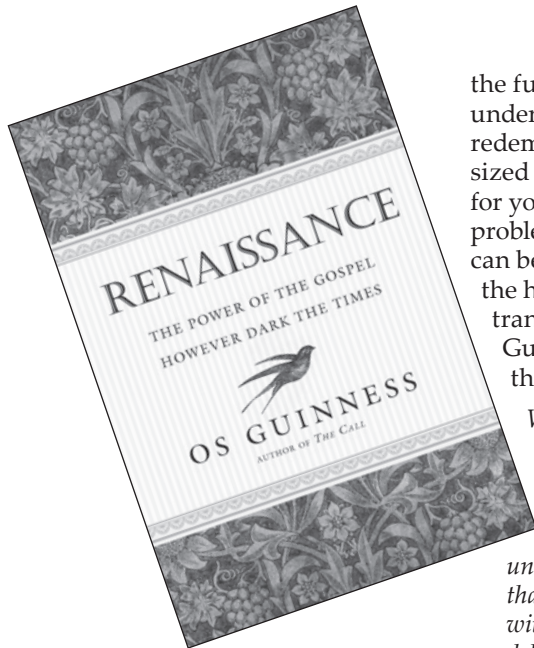
be any benefit to watching old movies? Why or why not? Any benefit to reading the church fathers/mothers? Why or why not?

(Note: If you haven't seen a silent film and want to give one a try, then I suggest starting with Buster Keaton's *The General* or Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*. If you haven't read a church father/mother and want to, try starting with Basil of Caesarea's *On the Holy Spirit* or Augustine's *Confessions*.)

7. *Thinking with more discipline:* In antebellum America and apartheid South Africa, Christians used scripture and theology to support some very un-Christian views, especially concerning race and economics. These Christians expressed a high degree of certainty about these matters; however, certain issues, nuances, scriptures, and complexities escaped their view. Over time, Christians thought differently about slavery and Apartheid.

What is a matter that you felt certain about at one point in your life that now you see differently, perhaps as more complicated or nuanced? What happened to facilitate this change? What is a current matter about which evangelicals tend to feel very certain? In what ways might we be more disciplined in thinking about that matter, take into view more complexities and nuances? What scriptures might we have overlooked or under-emphasized? What harm might we have caused on this issue? What might we need to confess?

Believing the Gospel We Claim to Believe



I think it is safe to say that nobody in the church in the West thinks we have arrived, that things are fine as they are, and that they'll only improve if we stay the course. We may point to different signs of trouble, challenge and decay, but we can all point to something, and regularly do. Something is wrong, we'd like to be part of the solution if for no other reason than to live a personally meaningful life, but the path ahead seems unclear. There are movements, and myriad voices of pundits and preachers, but for many of us all of that produces far more clamor than clarity.

Os Guinness suggests that to find our way forward we must first go back. For Christians this means we must go back to the gospel and ask whether we truly believe it and live it.

The first problem with this, of course, is that there is a great deal of confusion among Christians today as to what the "gospel" consists of. Revivalism has reduced the richness of

the full-orbed gospel of the kingdom under Christ's Lordship in creation, fall, redemption and restoration to a tract sized ditty, you are a sinner, Jesus died for you, you can be forgiven. The second problem is that in an age of disbelief, it can be hard for believers to comprehend the holy spirited power of the gospel to transform lives and change cultures. Guinness sums up a third problem this way:

We are in the age of gargantuan numbers, truly instant information, ceaselessly hyperactive social media, when the World Wide Web has become a flood-driven Niagara of raw, uninterpreted information and emotion that pounds down on us by the minute with its ceaseless roar and its drenching deluge. Who can hear themselves think, let alone make sense of it all with genuine reflection and seasoned judgment?

No wonder it is tempting to give up and go with the flow, rushing along with the crowds and sweeping past the best as we chase after the most. It is all too easy to get caught up in the sensational and forget the significant. (p. 41-41)

It is into this moment of our history, when the West seems to have lost its way and its moorings and the church in the West has been corrupted and made irrelevant, that Guinness offers us *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times*. *Renaissance* is brief and insightful, clear and logical, thoughtful and imaginative. Guinness is superbly gifted in writing prose that summarizes complex ideas accessibly and prompts reflection and begs for discussion. And he includes a lovely prayer and thoughtful discussion questions at the end of each chapter to help us process and personalize the ideas.

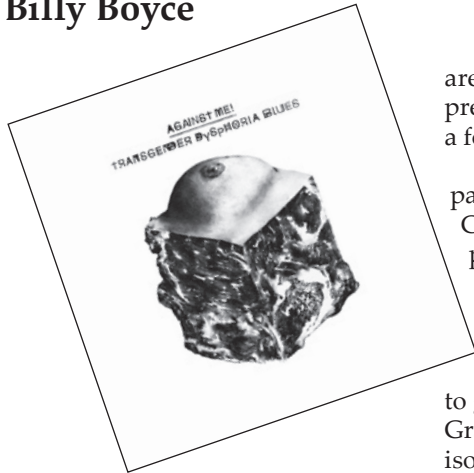
This is not a melancholy book, though Guinness insists we see the reality of the decay in church and culture with a clarity that is at times painful. It is an intensely hopeful book, because the decay has not weakened or made the gospel obsolete, and it is the gospel that is primary, and God's power in the gospel that is foundational. This is a vision that calls for each believer to concentrate on being faithful in the ordinary of their life, whatever that ordinary is, while trusting God for the bigger picture. It is, Guinness says, "when followers of Jesus live out the gospel in the world, as we are called to do, we become an incarnation of the truth of the gospel and an expression of the character and shape of its truth. It is this living-in-truth that proves culturally powerful" (p. 75)

I recommend *Renaissance* as must reading for every Christian in the West. I found it convicting, enlightening, and encouraging. It helped me think through what I understand as the gospel, review my commitment to it, and reflect on what it means to believe it so thoroughly that it shapes my life, my work, my relationships, and my engagement with culture under Christ's Lordship. ■

Book recommended: *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times* by Os Guinness (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2014) 179 pages + notes.

Music for a Transgender Journey

by Billy Boyce



In the contemporary American dialogue about sexual expression, there are increasing numbers of individuals talking about the transgender experience. Christians with friends or relatives struggling with their gender identity, or who simply want to listen with compassion, have an excellent resource for understanding in the music of punk band Against Me! Released in early 2014, their album, *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*, takes the listener into the murky waters of lead singer Laura Grace's journey with gender dysphoria, as she attempts to articulate her painful struggles with honesty and punk rock swagger. Musically, the album is a solid example of modern punk, scorching through ten songs in just under half an hour. The guitars and driving percussion

are matched by Grace's strong vocal presentation, and the album sonically is a force to be reckoned with.

However, what makes the album particularly worth the attention of Christians is the combination of the powerful music with the personal reflection in the lyrics. As the first album since Grace has come out as "trans," it is full of raw energy and emotions as she attempts to give language to her experience. Grace expresses deep loneliness and isolation—from self and from community—and demonstrates a longing for wholeness between the self and the body. At the same time, even while expressing this deep pain, she shows a heartfelt desire to be true to oneself, and so the "in your face" genre of punk rock is utilized powerfully in her struggle for personal authenticity.

This struggle—seeking to be true to the longings of the self and the resulting experience of isolation—is shouted from the very first song. Grace opens with these words:

*Your tells are so obvious
Shoulders too broad for a girl
Keeps you reminded
Helps you to remember where
You come from*

*You want them to notice
The ragged ends of your summer dress
You want them to see you
Like they see any other girl
They just see a faggot
They hold their breath not to catch
the sick
Rough surf on the coast,
Wish I could have spent the whole
day alone
With you
(from "Transgender
Dysphoria Blues")*

Throughout the album, Grace expresses the feeling that living the transgender life is the only valid expression of her true self, the only way to break the dissonance between the self and the body. At the same time, the attempt to bring the body and the self into alignment through gender reassignment alienates her further from society—both mainstream culture and the immediate family.

*Chipped nail polish and a barbed-wire
dress*

*Is your mother proud of your eyelashes?
Silicone chest and collagen lips
How would you even recognize me?
(from "FUCKMYLIFE666")*

In the midst of the isolation is a sense of inevitability. There is no other option for Grace than the one she has chosen; this inevitability is coupled with rejection for attempts to convince her otherwise.

*Even if your love was unconditional,
It still wouldn't be enough to save me
(from "Unconditional Love")*

*Does god bless your transsexual heart?
(from "True Trans Soul Rebel")*

With her sense of societal isolation, internal confusion, and inevitability, Grace seems to take comfort in the certainty of death; the album is woven through with reflections on the fleeting nature of life.

*All the things that I have yet to lose
Will someday be gone too,
Back into annihilation
All things will fade,
Maybe it's better off that way
I wish you'd stay with me
(from "Two Coffins")*

*All the young graves filled
Don't the best all burn out
So bright and so fast?
Full body high
I'm never coming down
Black me out*

(from "Black Me Out")

Reflecting on these lyrics, we see something both deeply true and deeply broken. For the Church to build genuine and redemptive relationships with family, friends, and neighbors who struggle with the transgender experience, we must discuss the issues of the body and self-identity through the biblical categories of creation, fall, redemption, and Restoration. While more work needs to be done for a full-scale theological engagement with the issues of gender dysphoria, this album offers opportunities to begin the conversation.

Grace's story of sexual brokenness underscores a thoroughly biblical reality: sexuality is deeply and mysteriously intertwined with identity and biology, and in a world that functioned the way it was created to be, these would line up and work in accord with each other and God's design. The desire for body and self to be aligned is rooted in Eden. Likewise, in the Fall we see this initial union torn apart. What transgendered persons experience is a particular, and particularly painful, symptom of what all human beings experience—the split of the body and the self that is a result of the Fall. We all weep at our inability to bring our bodies into alignment with

our sense of self, whether in struggles with body image, sickness, or simply old age, and we all long for restoration.

The robust biblical story of unity between body, self, and sexuality speaks to the postmodern pragmatism of American sexuality, which says that the pursuit of personal authenticity trumps any sort of physical normativity. As well, the biblical story corrects many Christians who underplay the significance of the body; Christianity that preaches 'you are a soul, not a body,' can unwittingly undermine the quest for biblical sexual authenticity by exalting the desires of the self above the reality of the body.

Instead, the biblical narrative gives full expression to the desire to have alignment between the sense of self and the body. By affirming the "createdness" of the body/self union and by acknowledging the depths of the Fall, we can lament the deep pain occurring when the two are in disjunction. Likewise, we can speak to this pain with the hope of redemption—brokenness finds healing in Christ. Yet, since in this life healing may be only partial, there is to be a community for the broken—the Church—where the weary come to find rest and support in time of need. Finally, there is the certainty of ultimate and eternal restoration; death will not have the last word.

These truths are particularly important for the transgender community, which has the highest rates of suicide of any of the LGBT groups (one study estimates that 41% these individuals are at risk of attempting suicide). Therefore, it is especially important for the Church to develop meaningful relationships with friends, family, or neighbors who identify as trans. *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* offers profound insight into the

experiences of this community. While certainly a raw album lyrically, Grace's story gives many starting points for redemptive conversations. Those who are interested in sampling the album will find the tracks "Transgender Dysphoria Blues," "FUCKMYLIFE666," and "Paralytic States" particularly insightful for these conversations. By compassionately engaging their stories, Christians can extend grace and hope to those who experience such pain, isolation, and confusion in their sexual identity. ■

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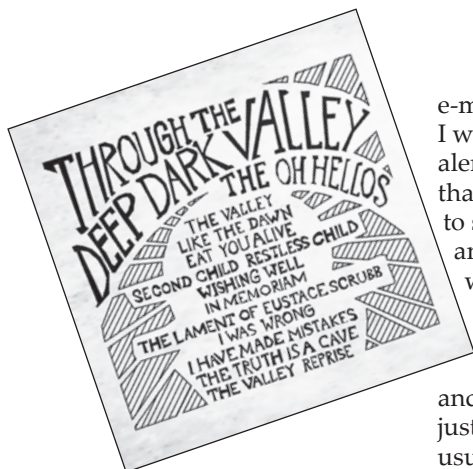
Billy Boyce is a pastor living in Arlington, Virginia, with his wife, Melynda, and their two sons. His theological interests include faith and culture, ecclesiology, racial

reconciliation, spiritual formation, and theological anthropology. His other hobbies include books, movies, music, avoiding mowing the lawn, and the quest for the perfect homemade pizza.

Music recommended: *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* by Against Me! (2014)

Editor's note: For those wanting to grow in being biblically discerning concerning the issues surrounding the transgender experience, we recommend the blog *Spiritual Friendship: Musings on God, Sexuality, Relationships* (www.spiritualfriendship.org).

Music of the Kingdom



About a month ago I received an e-mail from an acquaintance asking if I was aware of The Oh Hellos. Being alerted like this to some band is not all that uncommon—obviously people like to share the fine things they discover, and people know I love good music. I wasn't aware of The Oh Hellos, that is. That too is not uncommon since there is so much music out there, and I love books and film and food and several other things far too much to just concentrate on music. In any case, usually that's the end of it, my awareness heightened, the band having been pushed up a few notches on the list-of-bands-I-should-really-listen-to-someday that floats in the back of my consciousness. Not, however, in this case. He e-mailed me again. The third time (3!) I heard from him about The Oh Hellos I was annoyed enough to purchase their album, *Through the Deep, Dark Valley*. And the first time I hit play I realized this was a band too good to be missed. (Thank you, Tyler Dirks.)

I bought the album just before leaving for ten days at a cabin on a lake in the woods of northern Wisconsin. Blessedly cut off from the Internet, I decided to simply listen to *Through the Deep, Dark Valley* and write this review without doing any research on them. I know The Oh Hellos are a Texas independent band made up of siblings Maggie and Tyler Heath who often include a dozen or more musicians to accompany them.

And I know this, now that I've listened to the album: *Through the Deep, Dark Valley* is music of the kingdom.

This is not sacred music as that expression is used in marketing today, yet the songs don't just touch on sacred things but unpack them, revel in them, and bring them home. The problem we face in our brokenness is not merely that we have occasionally messed up but that something was wrong at birth, and now our only hope is if help can come from another.

*we were born in the valley of the dead
and the wicked
that our father's father found
and where we laid him down
we were born in the shadow of the crimes
of our fathers
blood was our inheritance
no, we did not ask for this
will you lead me?*

[from "The Valley"]

Quiet, creative illusions to C.S. Lewis ("The Lament of Eustace Scrubb") and scripture are woven throughout without ever allowing the songs to become "religious."

*I took my chance and bit down deep
the weight of the world was crippling
now I'll hide my shame with woven
leaves*

*I was wrong
and I'm so, so sorry*

*I knew you'd never forgive me
but I was wrong
and I'm so, so sorry*

[From "I was Wrong"]

Metaphors drawn from parables and teachings, in lyrics that invite reflection by an unbelieving world because they transcend mere doctrines to call forth humankind's deepest yearnings when we face the fragmentation we cannot heal. There is simplicity here, songs that tell stories so well known we wonder how the songwriter could know us so well. The melodies, harmonies, and accompaniment fit the stories and voices nicely, and I get the sense that Maggie and Tyler are more concerned that we hear what they are singing than that we are awed by the performance.

Through the Deep, Dark Valley is a beautiful album, the sort of music I'm happy to point to and say for all to hear: This I believe. ■

Music recommended: *Through the Deep, Dark Valley* by *The Oh Hellos* (2012)



Propitio

