

# Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

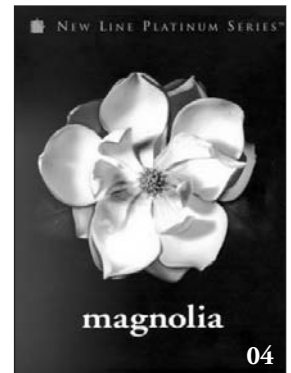
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# Editor's Note



## Where least expected.

**D**ick Lucas, rector of St. Helen's (London), says that questions worth asking as we read Scripture are: What is surprising in this text? What is counterintuitive, unexpected or startling? That has

often come to mind as I've pondered passages about the Old Testament people of God during their exile in Babylon. In his letter to the exiles, for example, Jeremiah told them that they needed to be discerning (Jeremiah 29:8-9). That is hardly surprising since they were in a land of idolatry, superstition, and paganism. What *is* surprising, however, is that the prophet never mentions needing to be discerning about the Babylonians. Rather, he warns them in no uncertain terms of their need to be discerning about what some of their own leaders and prophets are teaching.

Why warn them about their own spiritual leaders instead of the Babylonians? Would not the pagan beliefs, values, and lifestyles of their captors constitute a far greater danger to true spirituality than the errors of their own prophets?

I have no particular insight into the minds and hearts of the exiles in ancient Babylon. As I've thought about this text in terms of living in our post-Christian culture, however, Jeremiah's letter strikes me as exactly correct. We tend to feel uneasy in our postmodern culture which drips with signs of neo-paganism—be it coarse language, hopelessness, hard-hearted cynicism, or blatant denial of truth. Of course we need to be discerning in Babylon. Jeremiah need not state the obvious.

Most Christians are uneasy enough in Babylon to realize that some sort of danger exists. But each of us has favorite spiritual leaders. Thinkers and activists whose work has blessed us, whose

ideas have been formative, or whose program has shaped our life and priorities. Being told that we need to be discerning about *them*, especially when we're surrounded by neo-pagan Babylonians is hardly news we want to hear. Having questions raised about their work and ideas can feel almost rude. Like an unwanted and unneeded interruption.

It's interesting to hear the responses that greet some of the topics we address in *Critique*, such as Eminem and Nine Inch Nails, and in this issue, the movie *Magnolia*. Rarely do such reviews provoke the comment, "People aren't going to like this." I do hear that comment, however, if we publish anything that raises questions about the ideas of a leader in the Christian community.

That's not all bad, of course. We need to be careful in what we publish. There is too much strident prose in Christian publications, too much cynicism. And we might be mistaken.

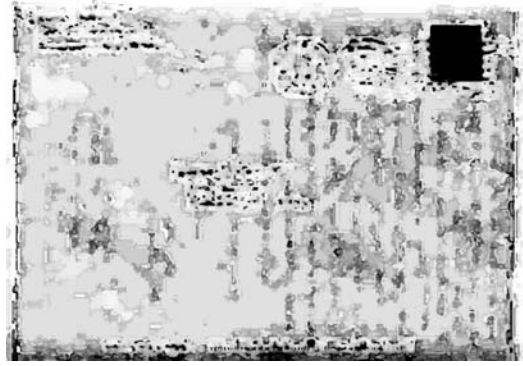
It is troubling, however, when Christians act as though raising such questions is illegitimate. Or when they refuse to address the specific issues or questions we raised. Does it mean they believe that discernment applies only to Babylon? I doubt that. Does it mean that the respondents agree with the errors being taught or consider them insignificant? I'd guess No.

I suspect there is another explanation. That in the press of busyness, we yearn for a place in which we can relax and let down our guard a bit. Discernment can seem wearisome when we're tired, and we're tired a lot. So we let down our guard within the Christian community—especially with spiritual leaders whose work has blessed us, whose ideas or programs have been helpful.

After all, don't we have enough problems in Babylon without someone raising questions about people we admire, ideas we like, and programs that work? ■

~Denis Haack

# Dialogue



## Promotion and Doug Wilson.

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

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Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

**T**hank you for your publication! I'd like to encourage you to advertise your publication in some way because I have benefited so much from it. Amazingly I had not heard of *Critique* until this summer when Don Guthrie mentioned it at Covenant Seminary's conference in RidgeHaven. I say amazingly because 1) Denis stayed in our home about 8 years ago and because 2) I never heard of *Critique* until I left Minnesota!

I understand that you do not want to boast about *Critique* (and had you said to me as you left our home "here's a copy of a publication I put together" I probably would have thought you arrogant!...yes, unfortunately I struggle with judging others unfairly). However, I am sure I am not the only adult out there who grew up in Christian circles where we were taught to "fear the world and anything in it that is not Christian." (As unbelievable as it may sound, my older sisters remember our pastor telling parents from the pulpit to "not take your children or yourselves to see that evil worldly movie that is all the rage!" The movie? *The Sound of Music!*)

Although I have now been taught of God's grace and freedom in Christ, many of my old ways of life are still so ingrained in me I must constantly strive to, by God's grace and strength, root them out. *Critique* helps me do that and reminds me so vividly that we can learn and grow from non-believers and what they do in our culture.

I just finished the latest issue wondering what other believers are out there that could grow from *Critique* yet are unaware of it because they didn't hear Don praise it at RidgeHaven. Food for thought and prayer for you all.

Thank you for what you do; it is a great blessing to us.

**Beth Ann Stein**  
Richmond, IN

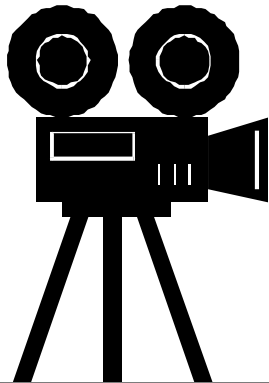
**I** am sorry that Doug Wilson has fallen out of favor with your fine journal. Some years ago you recommended his magazine *Credenda/Agenda*. On your commendation I have been reading *Credenda* ever since and have become a better person as a result. Yet in the last *Critique* [Issue #3 - 2002], Preston Jones in his article on Christian classical learning took Doug to task as a separatist and racist. I think it is helpful to remember that Doug Wilson is the Archie Bunker of Reformed Theology. (I say this in the most affirming and loving manner.) He rejoices in making outlandish politically incorrect statements. This is part of his charm and contribution to the church. As long as one takes everything he says with a healthy pinch of salt one is not irreparably harmed and life is given a fuller flavor. I would encourage Mr. Jones not to be unduly alarmed. The Christian classical school movement is doing just fine.

**Rev. C. John Steer**  
Rochester, MN

### **D**enis Haack responds:

In 1995 I called attention to *Credenda/Agenda* in these pages, and agree that Douglas Wilson has written some helpful material. Since that time, however, I have become increasingly concerned with what he (and others associated with that publication, and Canon Press) has published. Wilson may enjoy being provocative, but that doesn't excuse error. Similarly, we may find a curmudgeon like Archie Bunker to be charming, but that shouldn't lull us into failing to recognize his bigotry. The questions raised by Dr. Jones are worthy of careful consideration. Classical Christian schools are, as Jones noted, providing a fine education for many children. If that is to continue, the parents, teachers, and administrators in the movement will need to be discerning about what some of its leaders are promoting.

## Making Sense of a Movie



### A review of Magnolia

by Steven Garber

#### Film Credits

##### Starring:

John C. Reilly  
(Jim Kurring)  
Tom Cruise  
(Frank T.J. Mackey)  
Julianne Moore  
(Linda Partridge)  
Philip Baker Hall  
(Jimmy Gator)  
Jeremy Blackman  
(Stanley Spector)  
Philip Seymour Hoffman  
(Nurse Phil Parma)  
William H. Macy  
(Donnie Smith)  
Melora Walters  
(Claudia Gator)  
Jason Robards  
(Earl Partridge)

##### Director:

Paul Thomas Anderson

##### Screenplay:

Paul Thomas Anderson

##### Producers:

Michael De Luca  
and others

##### Original music:

Aimee Mann

##### Cinematographer:

Robert Elswit

##### Runtime: 188 min.

Rated R for strong language, drug use, sexuality and some violence.

**N**ot so long ago I was speaking to university students from throughout Indiana. After one session an undergraduate from Purdue came up to talk. We had had a conversation earlier in the day, and I had been impressed with his thoughtfulness about life and learning. He asked a question, and I responded with a reference to the film *Magnolia*. All of a sudden his eyes opened with surprise, and he said, “You’ve seen *Magnolia*?”

He explained. “My friends and I have seen it several times, and we talk about it for hours. But our parents have no idea. They would never see it. And of course, we could never talk about it with them.”

Over the last couple of years I have had conversations like that one, time and again. From California to Massachusetts I have met students who repeatedly watch *Magnolia*—and then talk and talk and talk about it. What are they seeing? What are they hearing? And perhaps more pointedly, what of it for folks like you and me, for people who want to understand our culture through the eyes of faith, who want to develop discernment for a deepened discipleship?

I have a very good friend with whom I share my life. The happiness, the sadness, the glories and the shames...day after day we talk and pray through it all. We also see movies together, and promise each other a good conversation about it afterwards. In January of 2000 we decided to see *Magnolia* within a few days of its release. It was the first film I saw in the new century. We do not talk while a movie is running, and

so neither had any idea that the other was wishing we had done something else that night. I did not get up and leave, partly because Jerry was sitting beside me, and partly because I had paid the full evening fare for the film. Yes, yes, I did think about my sense of vocation too, that some of what I do is “read” the world for others. But for two hours I strained against all that I was seeing and hearing.

Why? I don’t like postmodern storytelling very much at all. It seems to celebrate fragmentation, the disconnectedness of life. It is too much perspectives and pastiche, out the kazoo. My heart longs for coherence in everything. So there was a deep dissonance between what I was viewing and what I was wanting.

The director, Paul Thomas Anderson, tells a tale set in his own neighborhood, the San Fernando Valley of southern California. (One reading of the film’s title is that it refers to a major avenue running through the valley.) A wunderkind at 30, with three films under his belt, he has already been granted “final cut” authority, a privilege typically reserved for filmmakers with decades of experience. One serious European critic compares film and filmmaker to *Citizen Kane* and Orson Welles. Time will tell.

But to use that measure, even proximately, means that Anderson’s ability and vision are unusual. As *The New York Times Magazine* argues,

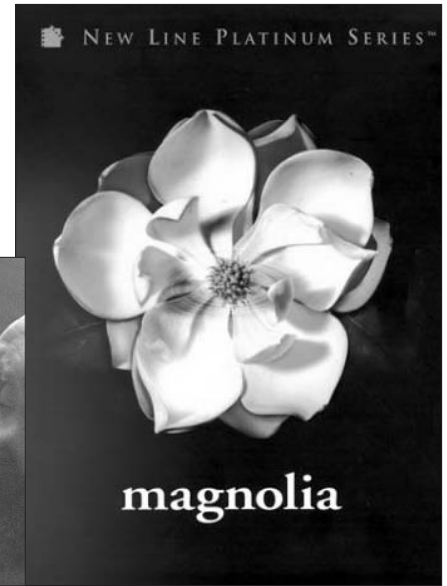
*Unlike most filmmakers of his generation, Anderson is not only technically astute (“I’m still young and I have to show off”), but he seems to have a larger, moral imperative in his films. They are not preachy, but it’s clear that Anderson was raised Catholic, that he believes in atonement and redemption. “When did you last go to confession?” I asked him. Anderson paused. “It’s about*

three hours long," he said. "Haven't you seen it?"

### Windows into Worldviews

Simply said, it is one of the most impressive movies I have seen. What happened then, between my longing to leave the theater, and that decidedly-different judgement? The longer I watched the more I began to understand something of what Anderson was arguing, cinematically and philosophically.

The film asks two large questions, ones that humans ask and answer in every generation, in every culture. Who are we, and what is the universe all about, anyway? Anderson sets deeply different visions before us, asking us to ponder their moral meaning: 1) all that is is a result of time plus chance plus matter, and so human life is first and last wholly accidental; or 2) we live in a world where human beings make real choices and there are real consequences, for



***"Magnolia is the most sacred and profane film I have ever seen."***

blessing and for curse. The differences are decisive.

In the first five minutes of the film, we are offered windows into that first worldview, with three stories of the most wildly, horribly coincidental tragedies imaginable. Well, actually, they are unimaginable. All involve deaths, and with each vignette the narrator makes a judgement about chance.

For the first, "And I would like to think that this was just chance." The second, "And I am trying to think this was all just a matter of chance." And the third, "This was not just a matter of chance." And yet, every bone in one's body cries out that it must have been. How could it have been otherwise? Way too incredible, way too awful, way too random.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial reaction to the film? To this review? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. What is the message(s) of the film? Consider how the film addresses themes such as: the nature of reality or what is really real; what's wrong with the world, and what's the solution; the fragmentation of life in our busy, pluralistic world; the significance of relationships and love; the significance and meaning of being human; whether there is right and wrong, and how we determine it; the meaning of life and history; and what happens at death.  
  
Where do you agree? Where do you disagree? Why? In the areas in which we disagree, how can we talk about and demonstrate the truth in a winsome and creative way in our pluralistic culture?
3. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? What details or background images seem to have significance?
4. Most stories actually are improvisations on a few basic motifs or story-lines common to literature. What other films come to mind as you reflect on this movie? What novels or short stories? What Scriptures?
5. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Discuss each main character in the film and their significance to the story.
6. What insight does the film give into the way people see life, meaning, and reality? How can you use the film as a useful window of insight for Christians to better understand our non-Christian friends? Might the film be a useful point of contact for discussion with non-Christians?



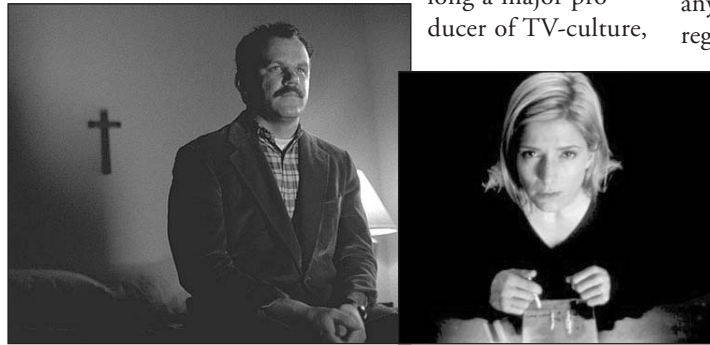
# The Darkened Room cont.

The prelude over, we are then set down in the middle of television-shaped California culture. An uncharacteristically rainy day all day for the Golden State, we are introduced to a dying TV producer (Jason Robards), his sad, drug-addicted trophy bride (Julianne Moore), his misogynist, alienated son (Tom Cruise), and others, including TV whiz kids, a game show host, a policeman, a young woman bearing bruises inside and out, and a hospice nurse. For three hours, we walk with them through the day, flitting from one to the other, feeling the fragmentation of their lives and of life as the rain pours down upon them, unrelentingly.

Long a believer in the importance of “not leaving my brains at the box-office”—as Donald Drew taught me years ago—I was desperately trying to make sense of it all. As I sat there in the dark, wondering why I was still there, I thought of Lesslie Newbigin’s perceptive insight about moral meaning: if the story as a whole makes no sense, there is no way for our individual stories to make any sense. This is the conclusion of a several-page long meditation on a conversation with a Hindu scholar, a friend of several decades who one day said to Newbigin, “I have read your Bible, and I find it to be a completely unique book. It offers a view of universal history, a meaning from beginning to end, and a view of the human person as a responsible actor in history.” Newbigin argues persuasively

that the two go together, the one implies the other. I know that when I first read those words I had literal chills run down my spine. It was so true, deeply, profoundly true. How was it that the Hindu could see so clearly what many Christians could not? He saw where the line-in-the-sand was, and could see what it meant for human life—for pre-modern, modern, and post-modern man.

And then the story on-screen changes. The Jason Robards-character, long a major producer of TV-culture,



***The characters are “lost in the cosmos”—but it is a cosmos where responsibility is at its heart, where regret must be held onto, even at the door of death.***

full as it is of false hopes and dreams of the good life, is dying at home—alone. His life-long pursuit of money, sex, and power has left him by himself in the last hours of his life—except for someone he pays to be there, his hospice nurse, who amazingly seems to see his work as more a calling than mere career. He truly cares for the man he is being paid to care for.

The dying man begins to confess to his nurse, to acknowledge his waywardness, his follies, his vanities. Struggling for breath, he remembers his youth, his first love, the start of his

skewed sexual prowess, the decisions he made as a young husband and father, his negligence over the years as a man with real responsibilities to others. It is painful stuff.

## Regrets and Responsibilities

The transformation of the story begins right in the middle of this confession, as he roots his faults and flaws in his failure to be responsible. “Don’t let anyone ever say to you that you shouldn’t regret anything. Don’t let anyone do that! You regret what you want.” With the moral

clarity that death sometimes brings, he sees his life as it truly is, he understands what it is that makes him human: that he has been given the responsibility of true choice, for which there are real consequences, for blessing and for curse. When I listened to him strain to hold onto

his humanness, gasping for breath and aching to see his long-alienated son, Vaclav Havel’s straight-to-the-heart insight came to mind, “The secret of man is the secret of his

responsibility.” At the end of his days, the dying man was overwhelmed with regret, and grievous as it was, he would not give it up. To give it up would be to give up his responsibility, and therefore his humanity.

Sons of Adam, daughters of Eve, we are able to respond, be responsible—it is the secret of being human. If that is not true, then this is a different universe than the one the Hindu scholar saw set forth in the Bible.

Very artfully, Anderson then draws in the other characters, relying upon the song, “Wise Up,” by Aimee Mann.

(Quite profoundly, actually, Mann served as muse for Anderson; he literally wrote his script reflecting upon her music, even developing characters to embody her songs.) Each person, who before this moment has seemed set adrift in his or her own universe, begins to sing:

*It's not what you thought when you first began it*

*You got what you want now you can hardly stand it, though.*

*By now you know*

*It's not going to stop, it's not going to stop, it's not going to stop.*

*'Til you wise up.*

For me, this moment in the movie was an epiphany. The scales fell off. Anderson was telling a story that was coherent, after all.

Their lives were twined together around the theme of human beings looking for love in all the wrong places. Doing

so out of their own skewed sadnesses, they distort love, hurting others along the way. To a person, in the words of the Hindu scholar, they are “responsible actors in history”—therefore the choices are real, the consequences are real, for them and for others.

### Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart

Remember where the film begins: a wager on the nature of the universe, on the meaning of human life. Horribly random lives and deaths... and I would like to think that this was just chance. Two hours later, we have lived through the day with these characters, seeing them in their multi-faceted, perhaps even multi-petaled, magnolia-like lives. With a different metaphor, Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun-Times* perceptively explains, “The connections are like a game of psycho-

logical pickup sticks.” Or as *The Guardian* put it, “The result is a giant mosaic that makes up one day in the life of the characters, constructed tile by tiny tile until a huge collective portrait emerges, with characters linked by what the film’s narrator calls ‘things that are not, one hopes, merely a matter of chance’.” The characters are, in Walker Percy’s



***Choices do have consequences, sometimes for curse. But the biblical vision is that they may be for blessing too.***

memorable diagnosis, “lost in the cosmos”—but it is a cosmos where responsibility is at its heart, where regret must be held onto, for dear life, even at the door of death.

From the very first minutes, *Magnolia* is a film for those with eyes to see. But in the last hour the eyes of one’s heart would have to be shut to miss the signs of something more, of a story that makes sense of all the stories. If you have not seen it yet, I will not ruin the end of the film for you, but, better than Cecil B. De Mille ever imagined, there is a judgment in history from heaven before the film is finally done. Choices do have consequences, sometimes for curse. But the biblical vision is that

## Garber’s friend, Jerry Eisley reflects on *Magnolia*:

It says in Scripture that two are better than one. I have found that this is certainly true when it comes to watching movies. As any work of art, a movie creates symbols and meanings that escape even its creator—perhaps this traces the Holy Spirit’s work in the creative act. In evaluating the movie *Magnolia*, it is especially valuable to have another perspective than my own—it often gives me the measure of humility I need to avoid digging my own pit!

For a long time I felt that the wonder of *Magnolia* rested in the clean contrast of the absurdist postmodern beginning with the law of action and consequence dominating the rest of the film. Randomness and regret stood side by side without any attempt at reconciliation.

After several conversations with friends, however, I began to feel that the scene of the raining frogs had more to it than I thought. Why, I asked myself, are the frogs so disturbing to the characters and the viewer (other than the fact that they splatter over the entire town)? The first thing that came to mind was the story of a frog in hot water. The temperature slowly increases until he’s cooked before he realizes it. Perhaps this is why the frogs are so unnerving. They imply a message: wake up before it’s too late!

In the Old Testament, the plague of frogs revealed the Egyptians’ refusal to acknowledge the authority of the one true God. The frogs were a judgment upon stubbornness and false worship. The same contest wrestles in the heart of the movie. *Magnolia* ultimately asks: what do you worship? The film questions our assumptions about celebrity, pleasure and success. I found it relieving to experience a movie that admits a connection between choices and consequences—and, more importantly, between our actions and our awareness of God’s presence in the world. ■

*Jerry Eisley owns the Foxhall Gallery in Washington, D.C., and is the Director of the Washington Arts Group.*

# The Darkened Room cont.

they may be for blessing too. The last minutes of the film have scenes where there is no other word than grace adequate to describe what is portrayed. This was not just a matter of chance.

As is true, anytime and anywhere, this is for those with eyes to see. The online conversations about the film are remarkable for their overall cluelessness. People are intrigued, but can make no sense of what they have seen. The very notion of a

moral accountability grounded in transcendence and perhaps even truth, is beyond the comprehension of most. Even with subtle and not-so-subtle biblical references—look for the numbers 8 and 2, from the first scenes on, and Ex. 8:2 twice—your neighbors and mine have no idea what to make of a

judgement from heaven. As experienced a reviewer as Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* interpreted what I saw as an epiphany in this way: “But when that group sing-along arrives, *Magnolia* begins to self-destruct spectacularly. It is astonishing to see a film begin this brilliantly only to torpedo itself in its final hour.” Where the fragmentation and alienation wearies me, its “edginess” seems to satisfy and stimulate her.

## Reading the Word and the World

How then do we make sense of a movie

like *Magnolia*? First things first. I would never say to someone, “See this movie!” Some of those I love most in this world have not seen it, nor do they need to see it. Anderson is an unusually gifted filmmaker, but his stories are crude, e.g. they are full of very foul language. As one very thoughtful friend put it: “It is the most sacred and profane film I have ever seen.” There is an “in-your-face” quality to his work which can be offensive, especially to people who love what is holy.

And yet, and yet. At the very



***Film is too powerful a medium for us to sit silently in the dark alone. We need the accountability of others' eyes and ears, especially for a film that is as cinematically and philosophically complex as Magnolia.***

same time, the biblical images of salt and light—in particular, the way that Jesus as the Holy One of Israel was salt and light incarnate in the midst of a very unholy world, engaging in conversations and relationships with very unholy people—calls me to think again about these windows into the human heart that film offers to us.

We are to learn to read the Word and the world, at the very same time. How is it possible? How do we, like the apostle Paul, walk through the marketplace of ideas and images of our day, holding onto the integrity of the gospel, and at the same time engage in “Mars Hill moments” with our family and friends, in our society and the wider world? I would suggest these commitments and questions.

1) See the film with a friend. And plan to talk about it afterwards. Film is too powerful a medium for us to sit silently in the dark alone. We need the accountability of other's eyes and ears, especially for a film that is as cinematically and philosophically complex as *Magnolia*.

2) Develop some questions that provide contours for your conversation. I almost always begin with, “So, what did you think?” It is open-ended, but it also reminds us “to not leave our brains at the

box-office.” In the most profound way, we see and hear with our hearts. Because that is so true, the core commitments of our lives ought to be reflected in the questions we ask as we ponder the meaning of a movie. I have learned at the feet of Donald Drew and James Sire here, and pass along their insights to you. In Drew's out-of-print *Images of Man: A Critique of the Contemporary Cinema*, he offers Descartes “I think therefore I am” as a tool for critically interacting with the medium of movies. He argues that films are always “images of man” and so are setting forth a particular understanding of what it means to be human, e.g., I work therefore I am, I love therefore I am, I kill therefore I am, I copulate therefore I am, etc. His insights are deeply Christian, formed by both a biblically rich vision of life and a love for film.

No one has written as thoughtfully and persistently about Christian thinking



in the last generation as has Sire, and his books take his wisdom and passions all over the world. The first, *The Universe Next Door*, is 25 years old and now in its 3rd edition; in it he offers a list of good questions to ask of one's reading, to help us "think worldviewishly" about our reading of anything and everything, e.g., what is reality? the basis of good and evil? the view of human nature? etc. The questions are easily transferable, from books to music to films.

3) Think contextually, bringing your life and learning with you into the theater, and then into the café afterwards. When I watch a movie, I try to remember that I am being engaged in a conversation by the filmmaker. He is arguing a point, sometimes very artfully, often very persuasively, and therefore it is "impolite" to just sit there, passive and unresponsive. I usually

take a notepad with me, remembering key quotes and ideas for the conversation that I know is coming. But also bring you, the constellation of commitments and cares that makes you you, your reading of the

Bible and of literature, of philosophy and theology, all the while asking, "How does what I am seeing and hearing connect to the rest of my life, to what I believe to be true about the universe? What is being argued for, and against? Where are the points of tension between God's purposes for human life, and sin with its temptations and distortions?"

4) Read reviews of films you want to see, or have seen. The Internet gives us access to newspapers and magazines from all over the world, and with the press of a few keys it is possible to read what the best reviewers are saying. You will find that their opinions are

diverse, some more insightful than others.

5) And finally, some films are not worth seeing. For my love of movies, I do not see very many, really. When I scan the newspaper or walk through our local Blockbuster, I have a hard time finding films that I think are worth my time, my heart, my mind. There is a lot which is the cinematic version of french fries and cotton candy—tastes good for a moment, but does no long-term good; in fact, it makes one unhealthy, rotting tummies



and teeth before the day is done. Films can be like that too, so we need to choose well.

Is it possible to make sense of a movie like *Magnolia*? I think so. Should you see it? That I do not know. *The New York Times Magazine* offers as succinct a summary as I have read, seeing

in and through its complexity "a three hour epic about family, responsibility, and forgiveness... a meditation on accountability at the end of the century." I agree. It may not be the film for you or yours, but it is one that invites us into a conversation about ideas that matter, about the very fabric of our lives. And it does so with unusual cinematic skill.

It is also one that thoughtful, passionate students who love God and God's world are seeing—time and again, and I think I know why. Anderson offers a window into the human heart, in fact a surprisingly truthful story of human life under the sun in telling

the tale that the sinfulness of sin bears tragic consequences, and that the gracefulness of grace is rare and beautiful and a wonder to behold. In the universe in which we really do live and move and have our being—where responsibility is "the secret of man"—we have choices to make, for blessing and for curse. That is what it means to be human, and that is no small gift in a film from the heart of Hollywood. ■

~Steven Garber

*Steven Garber is currently transitioning from Scholar-in-Residence at Council for Christian Colleges and Universities to Lilly Faculty Scholar at Calvin College. He is the author of The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years.*

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## Pieces of Insight:

As periodicals pass over my desk I am always on the lookout for articles from the pen of Alan Jacobs. Professor of English at Wheaton College, his essays are stimulating, wise, often provocative, and always informed by a mind which has been shaped by the truth of Scripture. Now in *A Visit to Vanity Fair*, a collection of fifteen of his essays have been published in book form. Jacobs is well-read, and his interests are delightfully broad—there are pieces here on Bob Dylan, Harry Potter, friendship, children’s Bibles, C. S. Lewis, miracles, preaching, and much more.

The essays in *A Visit to Vanity Fair* can be read in any order, and none are so long that even in the press of busyness we shouldn’t be able to carve out the time. And whether Jacobs is reflecting on the work of a poet (as he does in “Donald Davie”) or reflecting on how to read the Bible (as in “Dowsing in Scripture”) he writes with clarity, with insight, and with an obvious love for God. ■

~Denis Haack

**Book recommended:** *A Visit to Vanity Fair: Moral Essays on the Present Age* by Alan Jacobs (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2001) 173 pp.

“[C. S. Lewis] did not think his books would be read for long after his death: he expected that history would present new challenges for the Christian church, which new generations of Christian writers would have to address in their own way, not by reinventing Christian doctrine but by creatively re-presenting that same plain, central, inexhaustible Christianity to which he devoted his ability, energy, and delight.

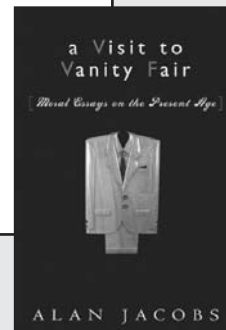
“We should therefore ask whether those Christians who honored Lewis in his centenary year—and it was fitting to so honor him—always did so in the best way. Many years ago V. S. Naipaul noted a particularity of the Indian attitude toward Gandhi: everywhere in India Gandhi was venerated as a saint, but the social conditions against which he railed for so long remained unchanged. It would be sad if the same fate were to befall Lewis, if people were to revere his achievement so much that they fail to devote the quality of attention to the challenges of their time that he devoted to the challenges of his. This is a real temptation for those of us who love Lewis, because to read his books is to dwell in an atmosphere of moral and spiritual health that offers dramatic relief from the confusions and frustrations, petty and grand, of modern life. But Lewis himself always strove to encounter and interpret the world in which he lived. His admirers should remember that the achievements of the truly great are best honored not by the one who praises their work but by the one who follows their example.”

(From *A Visit to Vanity Fair*, “Lewis at 100,” pp. 124-125.)

“My son Wesley has two so-called children’s Bibles. One he cares little for, perhaps because his burgeoning aesthetic sense rebels against the unprofessional quality of the illustrations, which are by other children. The second he likes a lot, referring to it as ‘my Bible’—a locution he doesn’t use for any of his other books, which indicates that he has picked up on the distinctive way that Christian adults talk about Bibles. When he asks me to read his Bible to him, he always wants to begin with the story of Noah and the ark, which is just fine, because the death of a world of people and animals is not mentioned in this version. But after Noah’s rainbow appears, the mood of the text darkens rather considerably. Of course, the most gruesome tales are left out: we have no crayonishly colorful depictions of Jael nailing Sisera’s head to the ground with a tent spike, or of Elisha unleashing two ornery she-bears on a pack of smart-mouthed punks.

“Still, the list is a rather dismal one. Here is Isaac narrowly avoiding being slain on an altar by his father, followed soon thereafter by the various lies and deceptions of Jacob; here are Jacob’s sons selling their brother Joseph into slavery; here are the plagues visited upon Egypt, culminating in the death of Pharaoh’s young son. I find myself trying to skip forward to the less unpleasant parts, like the manna in the wilderness, or Samuel’s anointing of David, or even David’s slaying of Goliath. Unfortunately, Wesley is the sort of child who likes to go through a book from beginning—or at least from the point at which he chooses to start—to end, so we can end up wrestling ludicrously over control of the pages. How can such disturbing tales (I ask as I try to pry Wesley’s little fingers loose from an account of Samson’s massacre of the Philistine army) contribute to my son’s moral and spiritual development?”

(From *A Visit to Vanity Fair*, “A Bible Fit for Children,” pp. 35-36.)



# Jacobs and Clapp

“I want to suggest that Christians may best reclaim Christmas, indirectly, by first reclaiming Easter. Ours is an ironic faith, one that trains its adherents to see strength in weakness. The irony at hand could be that a secularizing culture has shown us something important by devaluing Christmas.

In a way, Christians have valued Christmas too much and in the wrong way. I defer again to Hoffman, who writes,

“Historians tell us that Christmas was not always the cultural fulcrum that balances Christian life. There was a time when Christians knew that the paschal mystery of death and resurrection was the center of Christian faith. It was Easter that mattered, not Christmas. Only in the consumer-conscious nineteenth century did Christmas overtake Easter, becoming the centerpiece of popular piety. Madison Avenue marketed the change, and then colluded with the entertainment industry to boost Christmas to its current calendrical prominence.”

“The Bible, of course, knows nothing of the designated holidays we call Easter or Christmas. But each holiday celebrates particular events, and there can be no doubt which set of events receives the most scriptural emphasis.”

(From *Border Crossings*, “Let the Pagans Have the Holiday,” p. 80.)



One of the ways to be discerning about what magazine articles to read (compared to what to skip, skim, or merely file), is to watch for certain authors. Some writers—such as Rodney Clapp—have proven to be insightful time and again, and that’s a precious gift. He is editorial director of Brazos Press, and his occasional essays have appeared in *Books & Culture*, *Christianity Today*, and *re:generation quarterly*, among others. Now a collection of nineteen of his articles have been published as *Border Crossings*.

As with any good essayist, Clapp’s interests are broad. In this collection there are pieces on such topics as

Winnie-the-Pooh, consumerism, shame, family values, liturgy, the country-western singer Tom T. Hall, jazz, and The X-Files. Something for everyone, and a chance to learn from a thinker who seeks to see from the perspective of faith. You might not always agree, of course, but even the disagreement will be a stretching experience. And as with all such collections, each essay can be easily fitted into the gaps of our busyness. ■

~Denis Haack

**Book recommended:** *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* by Rodney Clapp (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2000) 208 pp + notes.

“I suspect that we might best deify romantic love by giving more attention to friendship in the context of koinonia, or churchly community.

I have in mind Aristotle’s highest form of friendship—the friendship of those devoted to a common cause. Christians are those people caught up in an adventure involving nothing less than the destiny of the world. As such, we hardly need the comparatively puny and petty adventures of romantic love. Christians do not get married because monogamy is an aphrodisiac; they get married because this is the key way they participate as sexual beings in an adventure far surpassing the potentials of any aphrodisiac, the adventure of witnessing to and building up God’s kingdom on earth.

“The important question for Christians, then, after five, ten, fifty years of marriage, is not, ‘Am I still in love with my spouse?’ The better question is, ‘Are we stronger, deeper, continuing Christian friends?’ That is to say, are we supporting and challenging each other in the faith, in service to one another, to our children, to our church, to our neighbors? In the words of Diogenes Allen, when Christian marriage is friendship rather than romance, ‘We do not

fight dragons or villains, as in ‘love stories,’ but fight with ourselves, as more and more of our self and our partner is revealed with time and through the ups and downs of life. We face an inward struggle with what we are [and, I would add, a political struggle with what the world wants us to be]. What is won is oneself and the other. Married people become people who love each other.’ In short, the sex lives of Christians can improve. But they can improve only once we learn how to make love after we have fallen out of love.”

(From *Border Crossings*, “From Family Values to Family Virtues,” p.124.)

“The argument I want to make here can be simply stated: Jazz can make us—especially the ‘us’ of white, middle- and upper-class, relatively comfortable American believers—better Christians. Put more pointedly and specifically, jazz can correct what James Cone, I am afraid with all too much justification, has called ‘the heresy of white Christianity.’”

(From *Border Crossings*, “That Glorious Mongrel: How Jazz Can Correct the Heresy of White Christianity,” p. 185.)

# Paper and Canvas

## Tim O'Brien:

**W**ords often fail me. Especially when I'm trying to convey an emotion or experience that took me past the edge of my comfortable, everyday reality: terror, exhilaration, shock, even love. It's hard to describe some events without sounding either crazy or implausible. There have been times when I've been reduced to pleading, "But it's true—you've got to believe me! It really happened!"

Tim O'Brien knows this feeling all too well. Like many men who have experienced the trauma of combat, he has spent his years since Vietnam haunted by memories and nightmares; it has been a natural subject for his writing. The problem with telling a war story is that it's hard to get people to believe or understand the extremity of it—the reality of the horror and destruction and hurt.

"In many cases," he writes in his collection of short stories, *The Things They Carried*, "a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness. In other cases you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling." (p. 71)

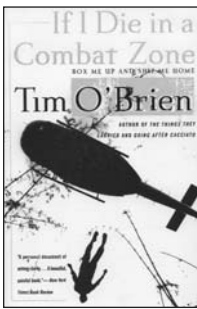
The difficulties inherent in the telling hasn't stopped O'Brien from trying. He is best known for two books set in Vietnam during the war. First is his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, which is an intense account that takes us from the

time O'Brien received his draft notice at age 22, through basic training, one year as a grunt in Vietnam, and onto the plane where he changed into civilian clothes in the bathroom, ready to go home, a damaged young man.

For the most part, O'Brien's time in Vietnam was filled with the faceless enemies and terror that he and his fellow soldiers worked hard to keep at bay. Here's an excerpt from his memoir:

*Three silhouettes were tiptoeing out of the hamlet. They were twenty yards away, crouched over, their shoulders hunched forward.*

*It was the first and only time I would ever see the living enemy, the men intent on killing me. Johansen whispered, "Aim low—when you miss, it's*



***The problem with telling a war story is that it's hard to get people to believe or understand the extremity of it—the reality of the horror and destruction.***

*because you're shooting over the target."*

*We stood straight up, in a row, as if it were a contest.*

*I confronted the profile of a human being through my sight. It did not occur to me that a man would die when I pulled the trigger of that rifle.*

*I neither hated the man nor wanted him dead, but I feared him.*

*Johansen fired. I fired.*

*The figures disappeared in the flash of my muzzle. Johansen hollered at us to put our M-16s on automatic, and we sent hundreds of bullets out across the paddy. Someone threw a grenade out at them.*

*With daybreak, Captain Johansen and the artillery lieutenant walked over*

*and found a man with a bullet hole in his head. There were no weapons. The dead man carried a pouch of papers, some rice, tobacco, canned fish, and he wore a blue-green uniform. That, at least, was Johansen's report. I would not look. I wondered what the other two men, the lucky two, had done after our volley. I wondered if they'd stopped to help the dead man, if they had been angry at his death, or only frightened that they might die. I wondered if the dead man were a relative of the others and, if so, what it must have been to leave him lying in the rice. I hoped the dead man was not named Li.*

*Later Johansen and the lieutenant talked about the mechanics of the ambush. They agreed it had been perfectly executed. They were mildly upset that with such large and well-defined targets we had not done better than one in three. No matter. The platoons had registered other kills. They were talking these matters over, the officers pleased with their success and the rest of us relieved it was over, when my friend Chip and a squad leader named Tom were blown to pieces as they swept the village with the Third Platoon.*

*That was Alpha Company's most successful ambush. (pp. 97-98)*

Every time I read this passage (no matter how many times I read it), I am struck by the fact that this is the only time O'Brien, who was in Vietnam for an entire year, actually saw the enemy and by the fact that this was the best his platoon ever did. It also strikes me that O'Brien conveys all of this with a great sense of disconnectedness. Not that I think he should feel otherwise, because I



# Truth in Fiction

feel it, too. No one will ever know whose bullet actually killed that man, but somehow that doesn't bother me. I understand: this is war. It's kill or be killed. I don't pause long before turning to the next chapter.

For some reason, O'Brien returned to this same story again in his novel-like collection of short stories, *The Things They Carried*. The prose in this book is beautiful and arresting; released from the constraints of non-fiction, O'Brien so skillfully juxtaposes the concrete with the ephemeral that even the twenty page-long list of things a soldier had to carry in Vietnam reads like poetry.

The first time I read this book, I didn't realize it was fiction; I thought it was a second memoir. No wonder: the main character's name is Tim O'Brien and some of the experiences he writes about are similar to those found in his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*.

The dedication says: "This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company [which was the historical Tim O'Brien's company], and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa." Usually an author dedicates a book to real people, so based on precedent, when I encountered the dedicated names as characters within the pages of O'Brien's book, I assumed they were real people.

The specificity and authority with which O'Brien describes the objects they carry also led me to think this wasn't fiction. Here's an example from page five:

*What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly of field specialty.*

*As a first lieutenant and platoon leader, Jimmy Cross carried a compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a .45-caliber pistol that weighted 2.9 pounds fully loaded. He carried a strobe light and the responsibility*

*for the lives of his men...*

*As a medic, Rat Kiley carried a canvas satchel filled with morphine and plasma and malaria tablets and surgical tape and comic books and all the things a medic must carry, including M&M's for especially bad wounds, for a total weight of nearly 20 pounds...*

*As PFCs or Spec 4s, most of them were common grunts and carried the standard M-16 gas-operated assault rifle. The weapon weighed 7.5 pounds unloaded, 8.2 pounds with its full 20-round magazine. Depending on numerous factors, such as topography and psychology, the riflemen carried anywhere from 12 to 20 magazines, usually in cloth bandoliers,*

***The prose in this book is beautiful and arresting; O'Brien so skillfully juxtaposes the concrete with the ephemeral that even lists read like poetry.***

*adding on another 8.4 pounds at minimum, 14 pounds at maximum...some carried the M-79 grenade launcher, 5.9 pounds unloaded, a reasonably light weapon except for the ammunition, which was heavy. A single round weighed 10 ounces. The typical load was 25 rounds. But Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried 34 rounds when he was shot and killed outside Than Khe, and he went down under an exceptional burden, more than 20 pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers and all the rest, plus the unweighed fear. He was dead weight. (pp. 6-7)*

Other than the rather philosophical "unweighed fear" that Ted Lavender carried, this

reads as an essay, designed to inform. None of these objects are imaginary or concocted by the author, he identifies standard issue weapons down to the last ounce. These are verifiable facts—nothing we would dispute. It's a very small leap to believe the medic Rat Kiley, who is named in the dedication, was real or that he carried M&Ms to share with wounded soldiers.

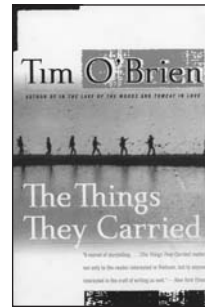
An early chapter entitled "Love," starts this way: "Many years after the war Jimmy Cross came to visit me at my home...and for a full day we drank coffee and smoked cigarettes and talked about everything we had seen and done so long ago, all the things we

still carried through our lives...and I decided there was no harm in asking about Martha [whom Jimmy had been in love with]. I'm not sure how I phrased it—just a general question—but Jimmy Cross looked up in surprise. 'You writer types,' he said, 'You've got long memories.'" (p.27)

This conversation is very real, made even more believable when the author admits he can't remember his exact words. This is when we find out that the main character, or narrator, is a writer type, just like his namesake, Tim O'Brien.

A few pages later, we read: "I told him that I'd like to write a story about some of this. Jimmy thought it over and then gave me a little smile. 'Why not?' he said...He got into his car and rolled down the window. 'Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever.' He hesitated for a second. 'And do me a favor. Don't mention anything about—' 'No,' I said, 'I won't.'"

That clinched it. How could I doubt that what I was reading is true? Tim O'Brien the character is a writer and he plans to write



# Paper and Canvas cont.

about the war. He doesn't plan to tell everything; he's going to hold some things back in order to protect the men he served with. An honorable and understandable thing to do, albeit tantalizing because I immediately wanted to know what he was holding back.

But wait a minute. Who is O'Brien protecting? Real or fictional characters? And which O'Brien are we talking about? The writer O'Brien or O'Brien the writer?

Just as the real, historical O'Brien intended, we're in a muddle about what's true and what's made up. Remember the earlier excerpt from O'Brien's memoir where O'Brien and Captain Johansen fired at three enemy silhouettes, killing one? There was no description of the body because O'Brien couldn't bring himself to look; he only heard someone say there was a bullet hole in the head.

In *The Things They Carried*, the fictionalized version, there is a chapter entitled, "The Man I Killed." This time



O'Brien looks. In fact, he stares: *His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole, his eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's, his nose was undamaged, there was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, his clean black hair was swept upward into a cowlick at the rear of the skull, his forehead was lightly freckled, his fingernails were clean, the skin at his left cheek was peeled back in three ragged strips, his right cheek was smooth and hairless, there was a butterfly on his chin, his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny and it was this wound that had killed him. He lay face-up in the center of the trail, a slim, dead, almost dainty young man. He had bony legs, a narrow waist, long shapely fingers. His chest was sunken and poorly muscled—a scholar, maybe.* (p. 124)

Notice how closely he's looking. He didn't glance once and look away. He's close

enough to see not just the big wounds, but the "slight tear at the lobe of one ear." Still staring, O'Brien goes on to imagine what this man was like: a mathematician, a reluctant soldier who, like him, hoped the war would just go away. Unnerved by the staring, one of his friends, Kiowa, tries to convince him it was a good kill. There was nothing else you could've done, he insists. But O'Brien doesn't move or respond. Finally, Kiowa intervenes, throwing a poncho over the dead body.

*"Hey, you're looking better," he said. "No doubt about it. All you needed was time—some mental R&R."*

*Then he said, "Man, I'm sorry."*

*Then later he said, "Why not talk about it?"*

*Then he said, "Come on, man, talk."*

*He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay with one leg bent beneath him, his jaw in his throat, his face neither expressive nor inexpressive. One eye was shut. The other was a star-shaped hole.*

*"Talk," Kiowa said.* (p. 130)

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What ideals, values, beliefs, and assumptions are found in O'Brien's books?
2. Does God exist in O'Brien's world? The possibility for redemption?
3. Is his a moral universe? How is right and wrong determined? Are there any heroes or villains?
4. If you read both books, which impacted you more, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* or *The Things They Carried*? Does the fact that one is a memoir and one is fiction have anything to do with your reaction to them?
5. Because O'Brien so deliberately plays with the notions of truth, critic Steven Kaplan wrote: "O'Brien liberates himself from the lonesome responsibility of remembering and trying to understand events and creates a community of readers who understand that events have no fixed and final meaning." Do you agree or disagree with Kaplan's assessment? What passages in O'Brien's books support your position? Why do you think O'Brien works so hard to make *The Things They Carried* sound like a second memoir?

Comparing the two versions of this story, which one did you find more compelling, more horrifying? Which one did you feel in your gut, much as O'Brien must have on that actual day in Vietnam, when he contemplated the fact that his bullet may have ended the life of another human? I have to admit it was the fictional account that took my breath away. When I read the memoir, I took safety in the fact that he didn't look,

## Graphic Love

and thus spared *me* from having to look. But apparently that wasn't good enough for O'Brien because he rewrote the story, fictionalizing it, but claiming responsibility and then scrutinizing what he had done. He feels the guilt and the burden of having killed and he wants his readers to feel it, too.

O'Brien's books are not easy reads (as you can well imagine)—they are intense, painful, emotionally wrenching, and full of the vulgar language of soldiers under the stress of combat. But for all of that, they are worth reading and discussing. Not simply because we need to know what happened in Vietnam, but because O'Brien is a writer of immense talent who seeks to tell the truth of what it means to be human during times of great loss. ■

~Marsena Konkle

*Marsena Konkle has an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College and currently splits her time between editing Critique, writing a novel, waiting for her husband to finish his MBA, and playing with their black cat, Ivan the Terrible.*

*This essay is an excerpt of a lecture, "Lying to Tell the Truth," given 2/02 at the L'Abri Conference on Religious Pluralism in a Postmodern World. A tape of the lecture (#6562) is available for six dollars from soundword.com ([www.soundword.com/lab2002.html](http://www.soundword.com/lab2002.html)).*

### Books reviewed:

*The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien (New York: Broadway Books; 1990) 246 pp.

*If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* by Tim O'Brien (New York: Broadway Books, 1975) 209 pp.

### Excerpt from *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts.*

**T**he Song of Songs is a graphic love poem. Early church historian Jerome reported that Jews forbade it to be read to anyone under the age of thirty. Traditionally it has been seen as an allegory of the relationship between Christ and his chosen people with no attention to the human dimension. While it may have an allegorical level, commentators in the past have had to perform some amazing interpretive gymnastics to maintain that this is the only level. For example,



Jamieson, Fausset and Brown in their nineteenth-century *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, understood "Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle" (Song 7:3) to be a reference to faith and love.

It seems to me that Jews in the Old Testament period would have taken it at face value as a poem that endorsed love between a man and a woman, and celebrated its physical expression. What stands out is the intense passion. The couple can't wait to be together. They admire each other's bodies. They kiss and embrace. All the senses are stimulated.

Writing about legitimate sexual expression in the current permissive climate can be difficult but, as Bono once said, 'Why should we allow the pornographers a monopoly on sexuality?' If we never refer to our sexual feelings we can give the impression that salvation desexes us or that we identify sexual longing with original sin. Sex and sexuality are among the most discussed issues in the arts today.

It is a sensitive issue for the Christian. We don't want to invoke lust or betray confidences. We don't want to engage in 'art as

exorcism' exercises by unburdening our past histories and current fantasies. Nor do we want to promote the 'sex as salvation' line that sees orgasmic excitement as union with God. But it would be good to encounter the demonic lie that infidelity and fornication are exciting whereas commitment and marriage are boring.

One of the best examples I've come across in recent years is the song 'Love

*If we never refer to our sexual feelings we can give the impression that salvation desexes us.*

Cocoon' recorded by The Vigilantes of Love, written by vocalist Bill Mallonee for his wife. It combines the language of the Song of Songs with the aggression of John Donne's Holy Sonnets:

*Honey, I wanna attack your flesh with glad abandon*

*I wanna look for your fruits, I wanna put my hands on 'em*

and ending four verses later with

*Some call it freedom, some call it shackled  
Honey, let's get together and build a  
tabernacle of holy flesh, holy mirth  
Let's take what's coming, enjoy every inch  
worth.* ■

~excerpted, Steve Turner

*Excerpt taken from Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts by Steve Turner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2001) pp. 74-75.*

## Visual Arts

<http://www.civa.org>

### Christians in the Visual Arts

CIVA exists, to quote from their purpose statement, “to explore and nurture the relationship between the visual arts and the Christian faith. Founded in 1977... it is our purpose to encourage Christians in the visual arts to develop their particular callings to the highest professional level possible; to learn how to deal with specific problems in the field without compromising our faith and our standard of artistic endeavor; to provide opportunities for sharing work and ideas; to foster intelligent understanding in a spirit of trust, and a cooperative relationship between those in the arts, the church, and society; and ultimately, to establish a Christian presence within the secular art world.”

### Ransom Ratings

**Design:** Obviously conceived by people in the visual arts.

**Content:** The site contains a wide range of information concerning CIVA, membership in the organization, and its activities. Members receive *Seen*, a 32-page journal which is published once each year, as well as *CIVASeen*, a magazine published twice each year. Individuals or institutions donating at least \$500/year to this non-profit can participate in the Art for Gifts Program. A set of slides of approximately 35 works of original art are sent to the donor who can pick which one they wish to receive (unframed) from the CIVA artist. Several exhibitions of art are available which can be leased and shown in church or community, and there is an advisor available to help churches establish a gallery—one only hopes both exhibitions and advisors are used regularly. CIVA also sponsors tours (to Portugal & Spain in 2002) for those interested in viewing and learning about the visual arts.

**Ease of Use:** Each time I've logged on the site seemed slow, but perhaps the graphics are more important to them than efficient computing speed.

Denis Haack

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*Critique* is a newsletter (published nine times each year, funds permitting) designed to accomplish, by God's grace, three things:

1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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