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IHUM 202

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William Blake, *Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds's "Discourses"*

### Un-Depressing Art

“This Man was Hired to Depress Art.” (William Blake)

Blake’s declaration is direct and not a little comical, partly owing to the ludicrousness of someone getting paid to depress things and partly owing to its accuracy. Considering the way art is often studied, Reynolds seems to have the upper hand. How often are the world’s great artistic revelations framed in lifeless PowerPoint slides or buried in lines of rambling Wikipedia commentary and made the objects of rote memorization?

Blake, on the other hand, envisioned a higher role for art: “The Man who never in his Mind & Thoughts travel’d to Heaven Is No Artist.” This claim gives rise to big questions about the relationship between creation (I extend the definition of “artist” to mean a creator with any medium, whether it be the visual arts, music, literature, architecture, etc.) and mysticism. What is Heaven? Is it subject to the individual’s own experience of Heaven, or is it a universal state or place? How does one get there? Is everyone able to become artists, or only a chosen few?

I may not be able to put a finger on what exactly Blake means in his mystifying of art until I have experienced it myself, but I do perceive that every creator of something has some inherent, mysterious sense of inspiration—fictional ideas must be brought into the real world from some other transcendent realm, if you will. Children, with their wild imaginations, have the best window into this realm. But as in Blake’s characterization of Reynolds, that inspiration can be smothered, and children can close their eyes to the heavenly realm as they grow older.

Perhaps that is what Blake means by the action of “depressing art”. Reynolds’ own paintings are realistic portraits, mere copies of physical reality. Blake’s own paintings, on the other hand, are filled with otherworldly figures, flames, mist, and rainbows of color that evidence his own experience with Heaven. One gets the sense that every piece has a deep meaning to Blake, even if that meaning is obscured. His subjects and intentions may be cryptic, but they are never boring.

I suppose this is where I stop to feel guilty about what I’ve done. Blake would be disappointed. For have I not just depressed art, burying the life of a colorful artist in lines of identical type, intentionally stylized to reduce emotion? (And I wasn’t even hired to do that!) Academies do not teach the art of un-depressing art. It’s something that the individual finds out for him/herself, like flirting, or punk rock music. Let’s give this paper another shot.

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There. I feel wiser already. (Thanks, Will. You're welcome, Josh.)