The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History  
By Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett  

Book summary by Luann Jennings

I waited for nearly two years for The Social Impact of the Arts to come out in paperback, so that I could (1) afford it, then (2) underline and highlight it to the extreme. It’s a rare occasion when I turn the last page of a book and immediately turn back to the first and start all over again. This book is that important.

Although not written from a specifically Christian perspective, the ideas in the book are essential to anyone developing, leading, and needing to justify investment in arts programs, anywhere.

Belfiore and Bennett are on the faculty of University of Warwick (UK), in the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies. Cultural policy is “the area of public policy-making that governs activities related to the arts and culture” (Wikipedia). It is a term used more commonly internationally than in the United States, where “arts policy” is more commonly used, if at all.

In the United States, we tend to think of “arts policy” as only being related to questions (and controversies) about public/government funding of the arts, so we stay away from the whole topic as much as we can. Americans often see shadows of Hitler and Mao in any kind of marriage of “government” to “culture” – a relationship that Belfiore and Bennett soberly acknowledge.

Outside of the US, though, “cultural policy” has come to embrace a much broader area of consideration than merely government funding. Cultural policy makers and thinkers are asking the most fundamental questions about how the arts work and what their value is to society at large; in order to determine whether, how, and how much to resource and support the arts.

Those working in the arts within the church might not immediately think of “political” writings as their best source of information and support. But it’s my experience that “there is nothing new under the sun” when it comes to the arts, and that the questions we’re asking within the church are the same questions being asked elsewhere.

The Social Impact of the Arts is not at all political, however. In fact, Belfiore and Bennett show true academic objectivity, even when dealing with sensitive areas like strident objections to the arts (including from the church), and to social and political engineering through the arts.

The book is an “intellectual history” of the most significant Western thinking—from classical Greece to today—about how the arts impact individuals, and ultimately society at large.

The very interesting first and final chapters are worth reading on their own, even if the body of the book (summarized below) is skipped, skimmed, or spot-read. Chapter One discusses the process and pitfalls of researching the impact of something – art – that has never been definitively defined or described. If no one really knows what art is, how do you talk about what it does?

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The final chapter (before the conclusion) covers contemporary arguments about “instrumental vs. intrinsic” values of the arts, into which I’ll go more deeply elsewhere since it is of great importance to Christians in the arts. But, in brief, one stance is that the art “experience” is an “instrument” or tool to make some other (i.e. more important) experience or event happen: pleasure, knowledge, self-awareness, social change, and the other categories discussed at length in the book. The other stance is that art is “intrinsically” valuable and therefore “needs no justification” (to quote art historian/theologian Hans Rookmaaker) or instrumental outcome to prove its value to society – often termed “art for art’s sake.”

Given the prominence of “intrinsic” arguments today, the book’s primary focus on seven “instrumental” arguments for and against the value of the arts in society is therefore a bit limited and limiting within a larger contemporary dialogue. However, the categories of thought it articulates have dominated the discussion about the arts for more than two thousand years, and still do dominate in many circles. In summary, they are:

**Corruption and Distraction** – The authors start with the oldest perspective on the social impact of the arts, beginning with Plato and appearing regularly ever since: that “the arts have potentially damaging effects on both individuals and society as a whole” by providing false models of reality, harming morals, and wasting time. (77)

**Catharsis** – According to Aristotle, in the earliest Western defense of the arts (against Plato’s assertions), catharsis is the beneficial, gut-level purging or purifying of negative emotions that happens when confronted with an arts experience that profoundly moves us.

**Personal Well-Being** – The second category of positive social impact articulated in the book groups theories about the emotional benefits of pleasure, play, and emotional fulfillment; and the therapeutic benefits of the arts for mental and physical health. Feeling good is good for us.

**Education and Self-Development** – This chapter focuses on arguments that art also effectively teaches and develops character. Aristotle also founded this line of thought, but it was developed further, three hundred years later, by Roman poet Horace and gained ground in the Italian Renaissance and beyond.

**Moral Improvement and Civilization** – Building on ideas about the arts’ power to instruct, Enlightenment and Romantic era writers, in particular, focused on the power of art to “humanize and civilize” culture, primarily through impacting morality and worldview. (145)

**Political Instrument** – Belfiore and Bennett identify several streams by which the arts have been used to advance specific social and political causes, including “abuse of the arts by totalitarian regimes.” (164)

**Social Stratification and Identity Construction** – Humans have used the arts to form and identify social groups. The arts reveal and strengthen educational, generational, ethnic, geographic, interest, and class borders; as well as stratifying those groups through assumptions about “taste” and sophistication.

Anyone who has worked in the arts within a Christian context will undoubtedly see in these categories the rationales we use, and those used by others to challenge us, most often. In fact, many of the objections and questions we face come from distinctly non-Christian ways of thinking about the arts! Having history at our fingertips might provide our best response.

As the book’s foreword states, “an understanding of how certain ideas have evolved over time into commonplace beliefs is essential to any serious investigation of the place of the arts in modern societies.” (vii) I believe that the work we’re doing within the faith-and-arts movement is exactly the same as those working in global arts/cultural policy: creating a rationale, and a system, for the development and support of the arts within our society, the Kingdom of God. A thorough understanding of what has come before us – historically, intellectually, theoretically, and theologically – is imperative to our success.

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**Luann Purcell Jennings** is the founder and Director of Church and Art Network. Luann has been an arts leader in New York City and Atlanta for more than twenty years, founding and running church arts ministries, serving a national arts organization, and operating theatre companies and projects. Luann has studied arts leadership at New York University, Columbia University, Lincoln Center Institute, National Arts Strategies, and University of Tennessee (MFA).

Luann has written on cultural policy for Comment magazine online, [www.cardus.ca/contributors/ljennings/](http://www.cardus.ca/contributors/ljennings/)