

Tom Fraser

Middle Mind Review

In Curtis White's new book *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don't Think For Themselves* (Harper San Francisco), the insidious organism of "blandly informative" entertainment is laid bare, with a cast of characters any culture-loving liberal would be loath to discover. This is not a line up of usual culture killers, folks, but a smiling menagerie including the aforementioned Terry Gross, Ken Burns, Steven Spielberg, Charlie Rose and the director of *American Beauty*, Sam Mendes. The problem? Death of the imagination. The Middle Mind is so powerful and pervasive because it tricks consumers into thinking that they are enriching themselves, or "getting cultured" when all they are really doing is putting their brain on cruise and enjoying the ride.

Consider *Fresh Air* as an intriguing example. Terry Gross is a bright sounding woman broadcasting from the University of Pennsylvania who invites popular writers and artists for a sit-down chat, ostensibly to discuss the process of creating and expressing their art. People, eagerly listening to *Fresh Air* for some "culture," are led to believe that *Seinfeld* is important and worthwhile because of its brilliant scriptwriting. *Seinfeld* may be entertaining, but it's a prosaic *sitcom*! White, with merciless clarity, reveals what Terry Gross truly does: drill the so-called "artists", usually TV or movie writers, about their personal lives ("How did you feel when your sister died in a car accident?"). It's a "pornographic farce," says White. Oprah without the pictures.

The point is, Americans are losing the ability to distinguish between "good" and "bad" art. This idea is closely related to the concept of "nobrow" purveyed by *New Yorker* writer John Seabrook in his book *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing and the Marketing of Culture*. However, to White, *Nobrow* doesn't go far enough, chiefly because it is, as White says, "a critique of the Middle Mind written from *within* the Middle Mind." In other words, because Seabrook writes for a MM publication, he has to genuflect to the gods of the Middle Mind (the Tina Browns among us) to grease his entry back in. One has to wonder how far removed White himself is from this phenomenon, though. He maintains the appearance of being insulated from these factors, but as an English professor at Central Illinois University, were there no egos he had to appease? No editors at Harper Collins to mollify? Further, White consistently praises one of the most universally acclaimed bands on the planet, Radiohead, who sit comfortably nestled in the arms of EMI/Capitol.

Academia, as the supposed bastion of creativity, does not escape the wild bludgeoning force of White's criticism. Again, lack of imagination is the culprit and discernment is key. Couched in terms of "Cultural Studies," universities across the land are treating all culture as one big semiotic "text." Therefore, "a TV commercial, a sitcom, tabloid treatment of OJ, a poem by Yeats- they're all 'manifestations of culture;'" all comparable, and all good. White decries the lack of true innovation and spark in the modern literary establishment, declaring the canon as merely an extension of the Middle Mind- "a strategy for managing potentially radical energy" creating a sort of "cultural museum" in which students can come and gawk at great works, but never, ever take them home.

For a book of social criticism, White's book is surprisingly readable. It's peppered with amusing parentheticals and colloquial footnotes, e.g., "2 Don't even start with the crap about the Middle Mind buzz. The Middle Mind is straight dope.", but also is the work of a passionate and astute mind. The books disappoints, though, when White searches for answers to the problems he exposes, and his strong style disintegrates when he begins to offer a New-Age/ Hegelian/ Buddhist solution to the omnipotent Mind:

This lack of spiritual self-reflection, self-comprehension, and self- realization is both the need for imagination and the poverty of the imagination in the same moment. Incapable of self-reflection and openness to possibility, to "becoming", we sink into the Godlessness of mere assertion.

It's this kind of nonsensical drivel that White railed against in Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. It seems that White, like many social critics, is so powerful when dismantling the constructs of our shallow society, but when pressed for a solution, falls anticlimactically short.