

# Theological Encounters with Visuality

## Introduction

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### 1. Art and the Human Capacity for Transcendence

[A]t the movies or elsewhere, as lived bodies we are always grounded in the radical materialism of bodily immanence, in the »here« and »now« of our sensual existence – and this no matter how different our cultural situations or differently organized and valued modes of »making sense.« However, as lived bodies, we always also have the capacity for transcendence: for a unique exteriority of being – an *ex-stasis* – that locates us »elsewhere« and »otherwise« even as it is grounded in and tethered to our lived body's »here« and »now«.<sup>1</sup>

This quote by film scholar Vivian Sobchack introduces themes we are concerned with in this volume: the grounding in my embodied reality of all my experience, including that of visual arts and film, and the connection between my senses (or more broadly, embodied experiences) and my efforts at making sense, and – precisely in and through this embodied groundedness – the human capacity to reach out beyond myself, to feel myself elsewhere in the ex-static transcendence of my concrete situation, yet without leaving my body behind. Thus, the question that we are pursuing throughout the essays collected in the volume is this: how can the sensory experi-

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1 Vivian Sobchack, *Embodying Transcendence: On the Literal, the Material, and the Cinematic Sublime*, *Material Religion* 4.2 (2008), 194–203, here 197 (original emphasis).

ence of art point us towards the transcendent within the conditions of the materiality of the artwork and the embodied existence of both viewer and artist? We argue that we can better understand the conditions for the possibility of such an experience by attending to the fundamentally embodied dimensions of aesthetic experience which we think of as an encounter between the ›bodies‹ of the artwork, the artist, and the viewer within their concrete individual and social situation. It is in this moment of encounter, in which the subjects encountering each other are affected and transformed in some more or less tangible way, that meaning emerges as a gift that cannot be controlled or produced.

In the essays that follow, we approach this question from a broadly phenomenological perspective inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Henry, focusing on the experience of this moment of encounter and what happens in it. Each chapter takes as its point of departure the concrete engagement with specific artworks, with a foundational-theological interest in exploring the structures and elements of aesthetic experience that can be considered as the conditions of the possibility of a transcendental experience of revelation and of a relationship between immanence and transcendence, between human and divine. At the same time, by tracing the conditions for the possibility of such revelation in the aesthetic encounter, we also consider this encounter as a source of insight into the questions, methods, and ways of theological knowing, contributing thus to the methodological self-reflection which is the task of foundational theology.

The essays collected in this volume move in a circular fashion around questions emerging from this overall concern in order to understand the structures that distinguish experiences of the sacred or transcendent in art, the role of body and imagination in the encounter with the artwork, or the constructive relationship between the artwork and its space. These questions are explored in each chapter in the dialogue between theoretical reflections and the analysis of concrete works and their experience that inspired us to think about a particular question or issue, moving back and forth between art, theory, and theology. While speaking from a Christian context and with the interest to further develop the theological engagement with art, we position ourselves consciously at the boundaries between Christianity, theology, cultural discourses about art and visibility, and theories about embodiment and epistemology, on the background of the self-understanding of founda-

tional theology as a ›bridge discipline‹ between different theological, cultural, and academic discourses. Furthermore, hopefully this work may also serve as a ›bridge‹ between different academic and linguistic cultures, integrating discourses on art and theology in francophone, anglophone, Italian and German contexts which have often developed in separation from each other.<sup>2</sup>

As a collection of essays, this volume does not claim to offer a systematic, all-encompassing proposal for a new or renewed theological engagement with the arts. The reflections collected here are consciously partial and incomplete, partly because the chapters originated in essays and articles written for different occasions and over a significant period of time in which our thoughts on the issue have developed, but primarily because we prioritize focused, in-depth conversations between art, theory, and theology over the attempt to cover all possible questions, theories, or genres relevant to the field. However, in order to provide some coherence, we limit our reflections to visual arts, even if we understand this broadly to also include performance art, street art, and film. The choices of artworks we engage with are, quite unapologetically, personal and subjective: they are works that have intrigued us, in which we have experienced something that we try to work through in the engagement with theoretical reflections, or that have raised questions for us that echo some of the issues raised in the discourses on art and theology. While personal, hopefully our choices still resonate with others and might become an entry point for their own theoretical reflections, a space for theological engagement, and perhaps a moment of revelation.

As mentioned in the Preface, Davide Zordan passed away before we were able to complete our work on this volume. In writing this introduction, I attempt to formulate our shared interests and intentions, underlying commitments, and theoretical and conceptual frameworks which we developed both in published texts – some of them collected here – and informal conversations, but I will also add some of my own considerations as they have developed in the years since we initiated this project. This makes for a somewhat awkward shifting between the first person plural (›we‹) when I speak of our shared ideas, and the first person singular (›I‹) when speaking on my

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2 Throughout this volume, in order to facilitate the reading process, we have opted to quote from the English translations of texts where available to us; for quotes from the original, our own English translation is given in the text, with the original quoted in the footnote.

own behalf and as the author of these lines. While awkward, I feel that it is the most accurate way of representing our voices in this text.

In what follows, I attempt to contextualize the individual chapters in the broader field by considering some of the central concepts and questions taken up and elaborated in different chapters in different ways. After a brief overview of some of the tensions and developments in the relationship between art and theology which still characterize the field today, I will briefly clarify our approach in this volume – aesthetic theology – by contrasting it with theological aesthetics in the tradition of Hans Urs von Balthasar. I then discuss the foundational theological perspective framing these reflections, focusing especially on the revelatory potential of the encounter with art and the role of the imagination as a connecting element between aesthetic experience, faith, and theology. A central argument of the following chapters is the constitutive importance of the embodied, material dimension of aesthetic experience, returning to the basic meaning of ›aesthetics‹ as *aisthesis* or ›sensory perception‹. Thus, a short discussion of theories of embodied knowing, especially those developed in phenomenology and pragmatist philosophy, will provide some further context for this argument, followed by a description of four dimensions of aesthetic experience understood as an embodied encounter between artwork, viewer, and artist. I will conclude with a brief overview and introduction of the chapters to follow.

## 2. Art and Religion/Theology

The history of the relationship between art and religion (in general, but focusing here more specifically on Christianity) and the theological engagement with art has been long and mutually enriching but also at times contentious, from the early iconoclastic controversies over the appropriateness of the veneration of icons to the Reformation's insistence on the word of God as the sole avenue towards the divine to regular accusations of blasphemy against contemporary art by religious functionaries in our times. Until the Renaissance, the history of art is closely connected if not identical with the history of Christianity, with religious motifs the main subjects of the arts and the church their supporter and patron. However, during this time, art is mostly considered as the ›handmaiden‹ of faith in a supportive and subordinated

role in comparison to the scriptures, providing access to the truth of revelation for those who cannot read, or serving illustrative purposes. Nevertheless, during these times, too, the arts develop their own visual theologies that only later are rationalized in formal theological or doctrinal reflections.

With Renaissance humanism comes the emancipation of art from Christianity and the development of its autonomous role, although art is never totally separated from religion but includes continued appreciation of the importance of the religious sphere and themes. The distance between art and religion increases further in the secularist frame of the Enlightenment in which the two are more and more understood as clearly distinct, independent spheres. The Romantic movement beginning in the late 18th century continues this development and, at the same time, paradoxically inverts it by locating the proper place of religious experience – now understood as a subjective, interior feeling of spirituality – within art, distinguishing the true spiritual feeling inspired by art (and nature) from the fossilized and externalized religious practice of the institutional church. Here, art and religious feeling are identical as art becomes the ›new church‹ together with a pseudo-religious celebration of the artist as the inspired creative genius. From the side of the study of religion, this paradigm is taken up in the works of Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade and others who discover the presence of the sacred in art and emphasize the non-discursive elements of the religious experience in the feelings of awe, wonder or fear inspired by aesthetic experience.<sup>3</sup>

In the (broadly speaking) contemporary moment, the traces of these various paradigms – art as the handmaiden, the separation between religion and art and art's secularization, art and religion as antagonists, the identity of art and religion (or spirituality) – are still present and have even diversified. Art historian James Elkins summarizes just five of many other positions in the current discourse thus: art *as* religious; insistence on the autonomy of art; acceptance of the alienation of discourses about art and about religion from each other; refusal of a monolithic understanding of art or of religion in general and instead insistence on particular cases; recognition of the relevance of religion for some artists or works but not others.<sup>4</sup> Although for

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3 For an overview, see Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Religion and the Arts: History and Method*, Brill Research Perspectives, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 19–21.

4 James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Arts*, New York: Rout-

Elkins, the field of art theory and history is predominantly characterized by the disinterest or antagonism towards the religious and the absence of religion,<sup>5</sup> he attempts to mediate between the fields of art and religion in a way that a dialogue can be (re-)established.

But for other art historians, this connection has never been completely severed: Roger Lipsey and Charlene Spretnak explore the traces of the religious or spiritual in modern art, focusing primarily on the artists themselves through their biographies and writings, to trace their spiritual intentions or religious feelings expressed in their art.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Lipsey, in spite of finding traces of the spiritual in the work of more than 25 significant modern artists, describes the development of art and spirituality as parallel movements that only rarely touched, echoing Elkins diagnosis of their separation. Thierry de Duve represents a different position, reflecting the paradigm of a secularist replacement of religion by art, when he argues – paradoxically, through the detailed analysis of Édouard Manet's work *The Dead Christ with Angels* (1864) – that »[t]he best modern art has endeavored to redefine the essentially *religious* terms of humanism on *belief-less* bases.«<sup>7</sup> Art continues to engage with religion, according to de Duve, but now in the mode of absence, as a way to process and find consolation after the death of God.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to these positions that either state the absence of religion from art and their separation, focus on the spirituality of the artist, or discover a ›secularized‹ or humanistic religion in contemporary art, Aaron Rosen constructively engages with artworks as autonomous elaborations of existential questions that religions also work through. Neither identifying the religious with the aesthetic nor separating them in contrasting, unrelated spheres, he recognizes »a tremendous potential for reciprocity«.<sup>9</sup> While he acknowledges moments of antagonism between art and religion (and also astutely notes the benefits reaped by artists, collectors, museums, the media, and

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ledge, 2004, ix–x.

5 Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion*, xi.

6 Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-century Art* [1988], Mineola: Dover Publishing, 2004; Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

7 Thierry de Duve, *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Ghent/Amsterdam: Ludion, 2001, 14 (original emphasis).

8 De Duve, *Look*, 50.

9 Aaron Rosen, *Art + Religion in the 21st Century*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2015, 17.

other participants in these controversies in terms of recognition and notoriety as well as concrete material, financial gains), he emphasizes the many different ways in which artists engage with »religious traditions, themes, and institutions«. <sup>10</sup> His discussion of religious (or religiously relevant) motifs or themes such as wonder, embodiment or identity focuses on their elaboration through specific works of art and could be understood as an offer to enter into a dialogue with religious individuals or communities about their respective takes on these questions and to collaborate in their reflections on them. Helpful in this regard is certainly his understanding of religion as lived experience <sup>11</sup> and his cultural studies approach to art and religion which considers both art and religion as cultural practices related to processes of meaning making and identity construction. Rosen might serve as an example for the theorization of the relationship between art and religion (or theology) that recognizes the autonomy of both, yet without this leading to alienation or antagonism but rather as the necessary precondition for a respectful, constructive, and – yes – at times also critical dialogue, a stance that we also take in the following chapters.

On the side of theology, we find a similar set of paradigms characterizing the range of positions taken: from continued support of the ›handmaid-en‹ paradigm in which art should be subordinate and in service of theology and faith (as seen in the controversies over the Richter window in Cologne, discussed in Chapter 6), to the antagonism paradigm recurring in denunciations of art as blasphemous, to the lament of religion being replaced by secular art, both in the public sphere and individual practice, to the recognition of their autonomy and attempts at dialogue. This dialogue, when beginning from the side of theology, may also take different points of departure and draw on different frameworks, leading to a diverse range of positions and approaches in the field of art and religion/faith/theology. <sup>12</sup>

Wilson Yates's ten ways in which art is important to theology identify a number of these varied engagements between art and theology: he considers art as ›signs of the times‹ to identify current existential questions that humans ask, as indicators of the spiritual character of a culture, as voices

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10 Rosen, *Art + Religion*, 17.

11 Rosen, *Art + Religion*, 19.

12 For a brief overview, also with attention to developments and opportunities in other religious traditions, see Apostolos-Cappadona, *Religion and the Arts*.

of prophetic critique and protest, as documents to understand expressions of faith across time, as contributions to the process of theologizing, as central forms of liturgy and kerygma, as a way for students to develop intuitive modes of knowing, as structures to enable the encounter with God, and as inspiration for theology to pursue the questions that are raised by the encounter with art.<sup>13</sup> While some of these roles of the arts in theology seem to echo the ›handmaiden‹ paradigm of the arts as assistants to theology or faith, others also point towards an understanding of art and theology as autonomous partners in dialogue.

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona underlines the essential and constructive contributions of art in religious practice and theological reflection: »Religion and art converge through ritual and ceremonial practices and the representation of sacred narrative thereby evoking what [...] Rudolph Otto would identify as ›an experience of the numinous.‹ At the same time, theological thinking and ritual action are themselves transformed by the work of art, so that art is not always merely the re-presentation of the original theological ideas, but is constitutive of theology and ritual life themselves.«<sup>14</sup> Beyond the consideration of art as a form or element of ritual or liturgy, and beyond the identification of spiritual with aesthetic experience, Apostolos-Cappadona argues that the arts are not merely expressions of theological or religious ideas but constitutive of both religious practice and theological reflection, to which they offer their own unique contributions.

This recognition of the distinct contributions of art to theological thinking in a mutually critical and constructive dialogue also shapes Gerhard Larcher's foundational theological approach to visual arts. He understands the arts as a *locus theologicus* and the mediation of revelation, in which – often in apophatic forms of non-showing – the traces of the transcendent become visible in the contemporary world. For him, the arts are »anonymous symbolic indicators of transcendence«,<sup>15</sup> which – especially in contemporary art – emphasize the absence of the divine and of ultimate meaning but also

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13 Wilson Yates, quoted in Ruth Illman/W. Alan Smith, *Theology and the Arts: Engaging Faith*, New York: Routledge, 2013, 56.

14 Apostolos-Cappadona, *Religion and the Arts*, 10.

15 Gerhard Larcher, *Annäherungsversuche von Kunst und Glaube: Ein fundamentaltheologisches Skizzenbuch*, Wien: LIT Verlag, 2005, 45; in the original: »anonyme symbolische Transzendenzindikatoren«.

provide moments of an »initial disclosure of meaning«. <sup>16</sup> Reflecting on the conditions of the possibility of recognizing the presence of the transcendent in the immanent materiality of art and its encounter with the viewer, Larcher, like other theologians such as Richard Viladesau or Frank Burch Brown, <sup>17</sup> focuses on the first step in the traditional foundational theological method, the *demonstratio religiosa*, or the reflection on the human need and capacity for relationship with the divine.

Critical of the sometimes overly abstract, philosophical or unspecific language of such arguments about the presence of the transcendent in the arts, Jeremy Begbie engages in the second step of foundational theological reflection, the *demonstratio christiana*, drawing on specifically biblical and Christian theological elements in order to recognize the trinitarian God in the undefined ›transcendence‹ revealed in the arts, and thus to strengthen the distinctly Christian theological reflection on the arts: »if we pay greater attention to the highly distinctive contours opened up by a ›scriptural imagination‹ and the creedal traditions that resonate with them, we will be led to question at least some of the more common ways transcendence is being related to the arts today, and discover far richer resources for engaging constructively what is undoubtedly a widespread conviction that the two are in some sense profoundly linked.« <sup>18</sup>

For our part, in this volume we draw on these multiple, often controversial conversations about the relationship between art and religion/theology. Although we consider the paradigm of antagonism as unproductive and largely overcome, we nevertheless acknowledge that it has significantly shaped reflections about art and theology, including our own, at the very least because we position ourselves in contrast to it as we engage in a mutually critical and constructive dialogue between the arts and theology. We find models for this approach in Larcher (in the field of theology) and Rosen (in the field of art history), for whom the autonomy of the arts and of the-

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16 Larcher, *Annäherungsversuche*, 51; in the original: »anfänglicher Sinnerschließung«.

17 See for example Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999; Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

18 Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2018, 2.

ology are not a hindrance but rather the precondition for such a dialogue inspired by the questions the artworks pose to us as theologians. Sharing Larcher's intention of tracing the structures of the aesthetic experience as an encounter which creates the conditions for an experience of the transcendent, we also situate ourselves more squarely in the initial step of foundational theology in seeking to understand the human desire and capacity for transcendence. But inevitably, our formation as *Christian* theologians will shine through in these reflections when considering, for example, the incarnation as the foundation for the possibility of the encounter between transcendence and immanence, blurring thus the only apparently clear distinction between *demonstratio religiosa* and *demonstratio christiana*.

### 3. Aesthetic Theology or Theological Aesthetics?

In this introductory contextualization of our reflections in this volume within the wider conversation between art and religion/theology, it is important to also take a moment to consider our choice to think about our endeavor in terms of ›aesthetic theology‹ instead of the more widely used ›theological aesthetics‹. Hans Urs von Balthasar's influence is undeniable in the shaping of the field and its characterization as ›theological aesthetics‹. Roland Chia provides a helpful discussion and critique of the distinction between these two terms in von Balthasar's own understanding and use of them.<sup>19</sup> For von Balthasar, theological aesthetics is »a theology which [...] develops its theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself with genuinely theological methods.«<sup>20</sup> For him, this means the rediscovery of the fundamentally aesthetic dimension of God's being and God's revelation in the world in Christ. By understanding God's being through aesthetic categories such as beauty and glory, and recognizing in the incarnation the ›supreme form‹ by which all other created forms have to be measured and evaluated, von Balthasar rightly returns the aesthetic dimension to the theological reflection from which it had been separated in the increasing emphasis on disem-

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19 Roland Chia, Theological Aesthetics or Aesthetic Theology? Some Reflections on the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49.1 (1996), 75–95.

20 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: Seeing the Form [1961], San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009, 114.

bodied reason and the separation between nature and God's grace in both Catholic neo-scholasticism and Protestant traditions. According to Richard Viladesau's evaluation, von Balthasar emphasizes the beauty of the revelation and the dynamic drama of the relationship between God and human beings, recognizing the aesthetic quality of these events in contrast to the stress on the cognitive dimension in theologies of revelation as the ›deposit of faith‹.<sup>21</sup> Given the aesthetic quality of revelation, in responding to the revelation of supreme beauty in the material reality of the world, the human being is involved in their whole existence, including their senses which cannot be separated from faith, as Chia explains von Balthasar's argument.<sup>22</sup> However, influenced by Bonaventure's theology of the spiritual senses, to which I return in Chapter 5, the senses used by the faithful to perceive the supreme form and beauty of God are the spiritual ones, gifted by the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Chia argues, von Balthasar emphasizes again the primacy of revelation and grace – after all, it is a theory based on the ›data of revelation‹, and God's beauty is perceived through the spiritual senses that are a gift of God's grace – reinstating the scholastic separation between nature and super-nature he attempted to overcome.<sup>24</sup> His neo-Platonic, ontological approach – recognizing God's being as ultimate beauty and the source of all created beauty – leads von Balthasar to a top-down reflection on revelation, which ends in a circular move of drawing on the data of revelation to discover, via aesthetic concepts, what was already established through that data. This approach does not recognize the autonomy of the arts and aesthetic experience as spaces of revelation and *loci theologici* in their own right. Not surprisingly, neither von Balthasar nor those inspired by his approach spend much time with the close discussion of specific artworks – and if at all, they tend to focus on the canon of ›high culture‹ – as the starting point and inspiration of their theological reflections but rather engage in abstract theorizations in which readers might find it difficult to recognize their own experience of art.

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21 Richard Viladesau, *Aesthetics and Religion*, in: Frank Burch Brown (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 25–34, here 35.

22 Chia, *Theological Aesthetics or Aesthetic Theology?*, 88.

23 Chia, *Theological Aesthetics or Aesthetic Theology?*, 90.

24 Chia, *Theological Aesthetics or Aesthetic Theology?*, 95.

Instead of proposing a theological reworking of aesthetics that emphasizes the primacy of theology, our approach of aesthetic theology attempts to begin from the aesthetic experience as a source and even quality of theologizing, where ›theology‹ is not understood as an abstract, cognitive operation but formed and informed by embodied ways of knowing in their indissoluble entanglement with intellectual ones. Von Balthasar understands ›aesthetic theology‹ as »the theological application of aesthetic concepts«,<sup>25</sup> which constitutes for him a »betraying and selling out theological substance to the current viewpoints of an inner-worldly theory of beauty«. <sup>26</sup> Given the simple identification of the religious with the aesthetic I describe above as one of the paradigms of understanding the relationship between religion and the arts, his concerns might be understandable. But that is not how we understand the term and characterize our approach. Instead, what we emphasize in speaking about ›aesthetic theology‹ is the importance of the concrete, embodied experience – the basic meaning of *aisthesis* as ›sensory perception‹ – in the encounter between artwork and viewer and the structures of the possibility of relationship between immanence and transcendence that we can discern in it. Art and theology thus both retain their autonomy but are able to enter into a dialogue through the recognition of the imaginative and ›aesthetic‹ – that is, embodied – dimension of theological knowing as a common ground with aesthetic experience. Thus, in this approach, aesthetic experience is seen as being able to lead to a qualitatively new way of seeing and knowing the world in a moment of revelation,<sup>27</sup> rather than being measured against the pre-established data of revelation. In contrast to von Balthasar's ontological understanding of beauty as the being of God, reflected in a lesser measure in the beings of the world, our emphasis on aesthetic experience as an encounter means that beauty (or other aesthetic concepts) are understood as experiential and thus relational categories. Thus we privilege, as Davide Zordan writes, »a beauty ›from below‹, foreshadowed in the folds of reality, received in wonder, recognized and respected in its variations and mutations, in its presence that is both veiling and unveiling.«<sup>28</sup> Focusing

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25 Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, 37.

26 Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, 37.

27 Larcher, *Annäherungsversuche*, 61.

28 Davide Zordan, *Sentire per credere: Soggettività estetica, rivelazione, fede: Alcune riflessioni conclusive*, in: Davide Zordan (ed.), *Riflessi di bellezza: Arte e religioni, estetica e*

on art ›from below‹ and the embodied, sensory experience of art, aesthetic theology lends itself also to a broader understanding of the aesthetic and the arts, not limited to the canon of high culture – although in this volume we do engage mostly with artworks that probably are considered as belonging to this canon by most – but discovering the possibility of the dynamic between ›veiling and unveiling‹ in other sensory experiences, as well, in the matter of creation, the taste of ripe fruit, or the chirp of a bird at sunrise. Although this is not an approach we have pursued in the chapters that follow, this understanding of aesthetic theology also has the potential to open up comparative theological reflections in the encounter with other aesthetic cultures and other theologies.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Aesthetic Theology as Foundational Theology

As mentioned above, our concern in this volume is the attempt to trace some conditions of the possibility of knowing God and entering into a relationship with the divine in the encounter between viewer and artwork. Thus our interest is in the *how* of the possibility of revelation and of thinking theologically about it, not so much in the *what*, or the content of what is revealed about God or specific Christian beliefs – although form and content certainly cannot be clearly separated, neither in an artwork nor in revelation and theological reflection. There is an affinity of our project with Karl Rahner's theological attempts to uncover the anthropological grounds of knowing God, the conditions in human existence that make it possible to hear (or more broadly, sense) God's word within the materiality and finitude of human existence and respond to it. As Davide Zordan describes the foundational theological character of this project, »in the light of aesthetics – understood as the theory of experience whose primary organ is sensory perception – all theology

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teologie, Bologna: EDB, 2007, 173–183, here 177; in the original: »una bellezza ›dal basso‹, presagita nelle pieghe della realtà, accolta nello stupore, riconosciuta e rispettata nelle sue varianti e nelle sue mutazioni, nel suo esserci che è insieme velamento e svelamento.«

29 For a very preliminary attempt, see Stefanie Knauss, *Sensing the Other and the Divine in Embodied Experiences*, *Concilium* no. 1 (2018), 93–100. A fully developed engagement with the aesthetic traditions of Hinduism can be found in Michelle Voss Roberts, *Tastes of the Divine: Hindu and Christian Theologies of Emotion*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

needs to become again ›foundational‹, that is, to be returned to the exploration of revelation, God's work in human history, to which we are called to respond personally, in our most acute awareness of our singular being and of the mode of how experience is given to us.«<sup>30</sup>

As noted before, art is often understood as pointing towards transcendence in the immanence of its materiality, opening up cracks – in an apophatic mode of denying to ›show‹ the transcendent, or in a kataphatic mode that points to the infinite reality of it – that allow the viewer to reach beyond the here and now in this moment of »*ex-stasis*«, of being pulled out of oneself in the aesthetic experience that Sobchack speaks about in the opening quote: »a unique exteriority of being – an *ex-stasis* – that locates us ›elsewhere‹ and ›otherwise‹ even as it is grounded in and tethered to our lived body's ›here‹ and ›now‹.«<sup>31</sup> The groundedness of this experience of transcendence in the materiality of the artwork and in the viewer's embodied existence, perception, and knowing emphasizes the horizontal dimension of transcendence as God's presence in the material world, without thereby denying the vertical dimension of God's ultimate unknowability. While, for some, horizontal transcendence is understood as the inner-worldly transcendence of going beyond one's immediate context to reach into the past or future, or to transcend one's own sphere of experience into that of another person's,<sup>32</sup> I see our understanding of it more in line with Hlulani Mdingi's use of the term which emphasizes the experience of God's self-revelation and presence in the world, what others would probably describe as vertical transcendence.<sup>33</sup> But in our view, the experience of art does not function within a clear distinction between a vertical and horizontal dimension of transcendence – the

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30 Zordan, *Sentire per credere*, 178; in the original: »alla luce dell'estetica – intesa come teoria dell'esperienza che ha nel sentire il suo organo privilegiato – tutta la teologia esige di ridiventare ›fondamentale‹, di essere cioè ricondotta a una esplorazione della rivelazione, opera di Dio nella storia umana, alla quale siamo chiamati a rispondere personalmente, in una consapevolezza più acuta del nostro essere singolare e del modo di darsi dell'esperienza.«

31 Sobchack, *Embodying Transcendence*, 197 (original emphasis).

32 Thomas Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion*, with a preface by Hubert Knoblauch, 3rd ed., Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996; see for example Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 5.

33 Hlulani Mdingi, *The Revelation of God: Black Liberation Theology and African Knowledge Systems Ask: How and to Whom Does God Reveal God Self?*, *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 36 (2023), 61–81; Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 5.

way in which God makes Godself known to human beings under the conditions of their existence, perhaps in the most obvious way in Jesus Christ, and the way in which human knowledge of God will always remain incomplete. Instead, aesthetic experience points towards the irreducible intersection of the horizontal and vertical dimension in the dialectic of presence and absence, showing and veiling.

If we understand aesthetic experience as a moment in which the irruption of transcendence in the immanent is possible, it is a moment of revelation, and it is the task of aesthetic foundational theology to reflect on it, as Zordan writes. Over against the focus on the ›special‹ or ›historical revelation‹ of God in Christ, this understanding of revelation draws on the theological concept of ›general revelation‹, that is, God's self-communication through »the order of nature, historical events, symbolic words, interior illuminations, and propositional statements«.<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther's description of God's presence and self-revelation in the world, although he does not use the term ›revelation‹ here, could be taken as the foundation of an aesthetic theology of revelation: »God in [God's] essence is present everywhere, in and through the whole creation in all its parts and in all places, and so the world is full of God and [God] fills it all, yet [God] is not limited or circumscribed by it.«<sup>35</sup> While the Christian churches have emphasized and continue to affirm the unsurpassable self-revelation of God in Christ, Catholic theology after Vatican II has also retrieved the patristic notion of ongoing revelation, that is, the recognition »that God is not silent in our time«.<sup>36</sup> These concepts of general and ongoing revelation allow us to see, from a theological perspective, the traces of transcendence that viewers may encounter in artworks as moments of revelation in which they are able to see something of who God is, and who God is for them, in a positive, affirmative (kataphatic) way or by way of contrast and negation (apophatic). Larcher argues that in the wake of secularization, when the churches can no longer claim abso-

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34 Avery Dulles, Faith and Revelation, in: Francis Schussler Fiorenza/John P. Galvin (eds.), *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011, 79–108, here 84.

35 Martin Luther, quoted in Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, Malden: Blackwell, 2005, 90.

36 Dulles, Faith and Revelation, 88, with reference to *Dei Verbum* and *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

lute authority over the symbols used to mediate revelation, the arts are even more important as testimonies of God's self-communication in which traces of God in the world can be discovered in the dialectic of visibility and concealment.<sup>37</sup> Rather than bemoaning this shift from the sphere of the church to that of the arts as a loss of religious sensitivities after secularization or as the supersession of religion by art as in the Romantic movement,<sup>38</sup> theologians should recognize it as an opportunity offering new possibilities to reflect on the event of revelation and the human response to it.

The recognition that aesthetic experience may have a revelatory potential does not mean that all artworks, in every moment of their encounter with a viewer, reveal God's presence. It also does not mean that other forms of religious experience or theological knowing are fully replaced by it. Instead it opens up additional perspectives to recognize God's presence in unexpected places, to be open to the unpredictability of the revelatory moment as God's gift of relationship that human beings cannot make for themselves but to which they can respond. It also means recognizing the aesthetic dimensions of forms of theological knowing that complement cognitive processes with sensory, affective, and imaginative elements, thus highlighting the embodied foundation of all reasoning. In the chapters collected here, we attempt to understand better how the arts may become this space of revelation, how it may be possible – but not predictable or controllable – to perceive God's self-communication in the materiality of our world and existence. Central elements we notice and will develop in further in each chapter are the dialectic between presence and absence in which the artwork gives itself to the viewer but never completely; the role of the imagination as central both to the aesthetic experience and the act of faith; and the embodied way of knowing that is foundational to all human knowing and intensely experienced in the encounter between artwork and viewer. I will briefly discuss the latter two – imagination and embodied ways of knowing – in the following sections.

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37 Larcher, *Annäherungsversuche*, 34.

38 Frank Burch Brown, Introduction: Mapping the Terrain of Religion and the Arts, in: Frank Burch Brown (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 1–21, here 11.

## 5. Imagination

The imagination has at times been denigrated as fantasy or illusion, or even as delusion. But without the imagination, we would be unable to function in the world. We need imagination to complete the partial perspective of our reality given our embodied situation in the world: at the most everyday level, I am able to reach for the handle of the cup in front of me hidden from view given its position because I imaginatively complete my internal ›picture‹ of the cup by drawing on perceived and remembered elements. Or, because I cannot perfectly *know* the inner life of another person, I have to imagine how they may feel after the loss of a loved one and reach out to them with gestures or words I imagine they will find comforting. Augustine recognizes a similar process in the sphere of faith. The answers of the scriptures to the question of what we are promised remain incomplete and unsatisfactory, and thus: »The tongue has done what it could, has sounded the words: let the rest be thought by the heart.«<sup>39</sup> Emphasizing the constructive importance of this interior, imaginative process, expressed in its slightly different Italian translation as »il resto immaginatelo con la mente« (literally, the rest imagine in your mind), Davide Zordan and I write: »Barely hiding the sense of frustration that the holy text leaves at the same time as it ›reveals‹ itself, Augustine affirms quite simply that the meaning of the divine promises has to be ›imagined‹ in order to find its strength and thus respond to our desire. What has been revealed once and for all has to be imagined ever anew in order to be believed and so that I can give reason most of all to myself of a truth that attracts and seizes me.«<sup>40</sup> It is with the help of the imagination that we ›complete‹ the revelation that is not fully captured in the words of scripture, and in doing so, we are able to bring the past revelation into our pres-

39 Augustine, Homily 4 on the First Epistle of John, 6, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170204.htm> [accessed 29 September 2025].

40 Stefanie Knauss/Davide Zordan, Introduzione, in: Stefanie Knauss/Davide Zordan (eds.), *La promessa immaginata: Proposte per una teologia estetica fondamentale*, Bologna: EDB, 2011, 7–14, here 9; in the original: »Celando a fatica il senso di frustrazione che il testo sacro lascia nel momento stesso in cui si ›rivela‹, Agostino afferma senza mezzi termini che il senso delle promesse divine deve essere ›immaginato‹ per acquistare spessore e così rispondere al nostro desiderio. Ciò che è stato rivelato una volta per tutte deve essere sempre nuovamente immaginato per poter essere creduto, e cioè perché io possa rendere ragione anzitutto a me stesso di un contenuto di verità che mi attrae e mi avvince.«

ent, appropriate it and let our lives be ›seized‹ by it. This requires trust and courage because we do not know if our imagination of »the rest« of the revelation is true, just as we can only hope and trust that our gestures of consolation will indeed be comforting to our bereaved friend.

The imagination is, thus, the capacity that allows the human being to respond to the revelation in the act of faith, to more deeply understand it and to allow it to become relevant to one's life, as Garret Green argues when he writes that the imagination is the human capacity through which the revelation becomes »effective in human lives« and is thus »the anthropological point of contact for divine revelation.«<sup>41</sup> Faith itself may be called »a new perception, a new imagination«,<sup>42</sup> as Nicolas Steeves describes John Henry Newman's understanding of imagination, faith, and sainthood. Newman, too, emphasizes the role of the imagination in faith as the capacity that can make real and concrete what is transcendent and invisible and thus cannot be fully conceptualized. Quoting Newman, Michael Paul Gallagher writes: »the truth explored in theology always needs to be ›appropriated as a reality, by the religious imagination‹.«<sup>43</sup> With Newman, Gallagher notes that »certitude does not depend on reasoning but on the capacity to imagine.«<sup>44</sup> The imagination, thus, has an existential significance in that it mediates between perceptions or ideas and human life, allowing us to know for certain in our very being what we see or think, and shaping our motivations, decisions, and actions.

However, the imagination is more than a mediator. In aesthetic experience, its epistemological function becomes apparent when the imagination allows us to integrate (visible) individual forms and shapes into an (invisible) context of meaning and, thus, to synthesize individual sensory data and pieces of knowledge into the meaningful whole as which we perceive an artwork in the unity of the materially visible image and the mental images and ideas that it references and that we bring to it. In addition to this synthetic

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41 Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, New York: Harper & Row, 1989, 40.

42 Nicolas Steeves, *San John Henry Newman: Fede, santità e immaginazione*, *La Civiltà Cattolica* 4 (2019), 163–176, here 173; in the original: »una nuova percezione, una nuova immaginazione«.

43 Michael Paul Gallagher, *Theology and Imagination: From Theory to Practice*, *Christian Higher Education* 5 (2006), 83–96, here 85.

44 Gallagher, *Theology and Imagination*, 85.

function, the imagination has a constructive function, as it allows us to represent both what is empirically present in the world and what is beyond the empirical,<sup>45</sup> enabling the human being to transcend their immediate situation into the world opened up by a work of art and thus to perceive the traces of the transcendent in the world. More broadly, Gesa Thiessen describes the imagination as »a creative faculty [that] is prerequisite to perceive anew, to imagine the as yet unrealized« in all spheres of life, from politics to relationships to art.<sup>46</sup> In this constructive capacity to create new possibilities the imagination is always marked by the »eschatological hope for a world that could be but which is not yet.«<sup>47</sup> I will return to this aspect in my considerations on the utopian imagination of film musicals in the last chapter.

Bringing together theological and aesthetic reflections, David Brown refers to this capacity as the »sacramental imagination« which allows human beings to make the move from the sensible world to God's reality in a way analogous to how the human mind is able to work through metaphor in language or symbols and images in the arts, »to take us to a different place«.<sup>48</sup> Brown is careful to note that not every act of the imagination necessarily evokes transcendence but it does provide the conditions for the possibility of such an experience and its communication.<sup>49</sup> The imagination, thus, does not in itself provide information about the content of the revelation but is rather revelation's very form, as Green notes,<sup>50</sup> the structural element in the human constitution that makes it possible for the human being to be open to and perceive God's presence.

Thiessen's argument that the imagination is central to both art and faith,<sup>51</sup> and thus a connecting point or shared characteristic of both given its mediating and epistemological functions, provides a foundation for our endeavor

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45 Green, *Imagining God*, 66.

46 Gesa E. Thiessen, *Artistic Imagination and Religious Faith*, in: Frank Burch Brown (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 77–90, here 83.

47 Thiessen, *Artistic Imagination*, 85.

48 David Brown, *A Sacramental World: Why It Matters*, in: Hans Boersma/Matthew Levering (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 603–615, here 609.

49 Brown, *A Sacramental World*, 609.

50 Green, *Imagining God*, 84.

51 Thiessen, *Artistic Imagination*, 77.

in this volume to think through the aesthetic experience in order to understand better the human capacity for, and actual experience of, transcendence.

## 6. Aisthesis and Embodied Knowing

Mediating between experience, conceptual knowledge, reason, existential and ethical appropriation, and eschatological hope, the imagination is a central element of the embodied ways of knowing in aesthetic experience. Descartes' heritage has led to the widely shared assumption that the only form of true and reliable knowledge is disembodied, objective reason. But in her aptly titled essay »What My Fingers Knew«, Vivian Sobchack describes an experience at the cinema watching the opening images of *The Piano* (Jane Campion, NZ/AU/FR 1993) when her body ›knew‹ the mysterious image that only later turns out to be the protagonist's fingers, long before her reason was able to make sense of it: ›my fingers *comprehended* the image, *grasped* it with a nearly imperceptible tingle of attention and anticipation and, offscreen, ›felt themselves‹ as the potentiality in the subjective and fleshly situation figured onscreen. And this *before* I refigured my carnal comprehension into the conscious thought: ›Ah, those are fingers I am looking at.‹<sup>52</sup> This experience is an illustration of Sobchack's broader claim about

the embodied and radically material nature of human existence and thus the lived body's essential implication in making »meaning« out of bodily »sense«. Making conscious sense from our carnal senses is something we do whether we are watching a film [or encountering any kind of artwork], moving about in our daily lives and complex worlds, or even thinking abstractly about the enigmas of moving images, cultural formations, and the meanings and values that inform our existence.<sup>53</sup>

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52 Vivian Sobchack, *What My Fingers Knew: The Cinethetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh*, in: Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 53–84, here 63 (original emphasis).

53 Vivian Sobchack, Introduction, in: Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 1–9, here 1.

Recognizing the fundamentally embodied nature of all our engagements with the world, including our rational operations, one of the claims we make in this volume is that embodied experience and embodied forms of knowing are also fundamental to the experience of the divine and thus one of the conditions for the possibility of encountering God.

Although, as Sobchack notes, we make sense of our senses in all moments of our engagement with the world, this is mostly an unconscious process of which we only rarely become aware. The encounter with art and the reflection of this experience is one such space, as philosopher Mark Johnson argues, where we more consciously experience and more fully understand how the aesthetic as embodied experience is a part of all operations of meaning making. Drawing on philosopher John Dewey, Johnson writes that the aesthetic extends to »all processes by which we enact meaning through perception, bodily movement, feeling, and imagination [...] *all meaning-making experience is aesthetic experience.*«<sup>54</sup> The arts are not the exclusive sphere of aesthetic meaning making but are distinct by the degree to which we experience these processes: they are »intensified, nuanced, and complex realizations of the processes of meaning in everyday life.«<sup>55</sup> With this view of the continuity among all processes of meaning making – but in varying degrees of the consciousness of their aesthetic dimension – Johnson’s theory of embodied knowing contrasts with the views of aesthetic theologians such as Begbie who do recognize the contribution of the aesthetic experience to human self-understanding but distinguish its epistemological qualities from other forms of theoretical or moral knowledge.<sup>56</sup>

With his argument about the bodily foundation in sensory – that is, aesthetic – experience of all forms of meaning making, even the more abstract and conceptual ones, Johnson positions himself in contrast to two connected developments he identifies in the philosophical tradition. One is the increasing marginalization of aesthetic theory in philosophy, following Kant’s and Baumgarten’s theories of knowledge that define knowledge as derived from cognitive, and thus objective, judgement, whereas aesthetic judgements are

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54 Mark Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought: The Bodily Roots of Philosophy, Science, Morality, and Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, 2 (original emphasis).

55 Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 25.

56 Jeremy Begbie, quoted in Illman/Smith, *Theology and the Arts*, 31.

based in feeling and bodily sensations and thus subjective and irrelevant to knowledge.<sup>57</sup> Romanticism's counter-movement with its emphasis on feeling and sensation did nothing to undo this binary between reason and feeling; it simply lifted up the other side of the binary in contrast to Kant's emphasis on the rational.<sup>58</sup> This understanding of the aesthetic experience as contrasting with the rational operations of the human mind fits with the broader tradition of disembodied reason that posits the clear separation between body and mind, emphasizes reason as the uniquely human capacity for knowledge, and considers feeling or sensation – which characterize aesthetic experience, as well – as subjective and unable to lead to knowledge.<sup>59</sup>

The other development, also initiated by Kant, defines the proper attitude in aesthetic experience as the disinterested observation of an object without any interest in the possibly concrete relationship of the object – and its experience – to the rest of life. In fact, the aesthetic attitude, according to Kant, has to be distinct and separate from the concerns of everyday life.<sup>60</sup> Focusing on the specific experience of works of art in dedicated spaces like the museum, theater or concert hall and separating this experience from that of everyday sensory engagement with the world, philosophical aesthetics became an abstract theory of beauty, concerned with definitions of what is considered art or questions of taste that were marginal to the overall philosophical project, highly abstract, and unrelated to broader considerations of processes of knowing, meaning or decision making. Perhaps in order to improve the credentials of aesthetic theory and as a counter-movement to Kant's association of the aesthetic with the bodily sensations, the embodied dimension of aesthetic experience as *aisthesis*, sensory perception and feeling, became irrelevant in most theories of art and its reception, a tendency that is still visible today, as Jojada Verrips notes for aesthetic theory in general, and the relationship between religion and the arts in particular.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast to these developments, the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the body as the starting point and foundation

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57 Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 6–10.

58 Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 12.

59 Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 3.

60 Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 10.

61 Jojada Verrips, *Missing Religion, Overlooking the Body*, in: James Elkins/David Morgan (eds.), *Re-enchantment*, New York: Routledge, 2009, 287–296, here 294.

of all human experiences and thus also of human knowing in and through the embodied entanglement with the world.<sup>62</sup> Heike Peckruhn formulates this central insight thus: »bodily perception [is] the space and process of how we make sense to the world and of the world.«<sup>63</sup> Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, scholars such as Johnson, Sobchack or Laura U. Marks return to the original meaning of *aisthesis* in order to think about how we know through our bodies, how we make sense with our senses, and how the encounter with artworks – be it films or others – can provide insight into these operations of embodied meaning making. Thus, Marks writes that the senses operate »between the sensible and the thinkable«<sup>64</sup> and are a means of knowledge, ethics and pleasure,<sup>65</sup> without distinguishing between these forms of engaging the world.

Johnson captures this insight in the notion of the »embodied mind«:<sup>66</sup> the embodied basis and dimension of all meaning making in contrast to the Cartesian heritage of body-mind dualism in which knowing is the purview of the rational mind alone. Insights from neurosciences, pragmatist philosophy, and linguistics lead Johnson to the recognition that »all our conceptual systems [...] are rooted in body-based meaning structures«.<sup>67</sup> This includes, for example, the embodied patterns for meaning-making, or »image schemas«, a term developed by Johnson and George Lakoff, such as up-down or the intensity of a sensation, at the foundation of abstract concepts.<sup>68</sup> Relatedly, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio argues for the significance of emotions and feelings as nonconscious and conscious, embodied (although not innate)

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62 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin French, New York: Routledge, 1962.

63 Heike Peckruhn, *Embodied Knowing: Body, Epistemology, Context, and Hermeneutics*, in: Marion Grau/Jason Wyman (eds.), *What Is Constructive Theology? Histories, Methodologies, and Perspectives*, London: T&T Clark, 2020, 77–102, here 89.

64 Laura U. Marks, *Thinking Multisensory Culture*, in: Bettina Papenburg/Marta Zarzycka (eds.), *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2013, 144–157, here 144.

65 Marks, *Thinking Multisensory Culture*, 150.

66 Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Human Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, xi.

67 Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 2.

68 See for a brief summary Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 18.

response patterns to situations that shape our values and thus influence our development of consciousness and decision making.<sup>69</sup>

As noted above, Johnson argues that embodied meaning making is the norm of all processes of knowing – in everyday life, in abstract theorizing, moral decision making, in aesthetic experience, and also in »embodied spirituality« in which he recognizes the human capacity for transcendence of the self through »transformative acts that change both our world and ourselves«. <sup>70</sup> His notion of transcendence and the grace experienced as an unexpected gift is non-theistic and immanent, grounded in the human capacity for creativity rather than an infinite being, yet his thinking provides a starting point also for theology to recognize the connections between embodied perception, human knowledge, and the possibility to reach beyond one's immediate, embodied situation from within it.

From the perspective of visual and cultural studies, Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka also emphasize the importance of returning to the starting point of aesthetics in *aisthesis* in order to fully understand the processes of embodied knowing that occur in aesthetic experience: »we argue for an understanding of aesthetics as *aisthesis*, that is, as perception, sensibility or sensation, emphasising the cultural formation of the senses.« <sup>71</sup> Taking his point of departure from Iris Murdoch's description of a fictional character's experience in front of a painting by Giorgione as »[a]n intense physical feeling of anxiety«, Robert E. Innis further argues that the embodied nature of the encounter with art cannot be parsed into the distinct and different sensory perceptions of eyes or ears but functions synesthetically and resonates with a viewer's whole body.<sup>72</sup>

While emphasizing the embodied dimension of aesthetic experience, Papenburg and Zarzycka note the importance of placing individual sensory perception within the social context in which it has been shaped. How we see and what we see – or what we consider relevant to be noticed in the

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69 See for example Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, San Diego: Harcourt, 1999.

70 Johnson, *The Meaning of the Human Body*, 281.

71 Bettina Papenburg/Marta Zarzycka, Introduction, in: Bettina Papenburg/Marta Zarzycka (eds.), *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2013, 1–18, here 3 (original emphasis).

72 Robert E. Innis, *Dimensions of Aesthetic Encounters: Perception, Interpretation, and the Signs of Art*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022, 14.

mass of sensory data we receive through our senses in each moment of our life – is at least to a considerable extent formed by cultural conventions and norms. The subjective embodied experience of the encounter between work and viewer is thus always integrated into and shaped by the network of values and meanings that characterize the – possibly distinct – contexts of the artist, the work, and the viewer, in addition to the personal sensory capacities, values, expectations and experiences that shape the artist's work or the viewer's engagement with it. Referencing Merleau-Ponty, Peckruhn writes: »To *be* is to experience, to experience is to bodily perceive, and to perceive is to be oriented in the world engaging in bodily sociocultural acts.«<sup>73</sup> Perception is thus never purely subjective but socially constructed, and this also applies to the meaning we make from it and the meaning made of our perceiving bodies: »There is no neutral gaze, no objective touch shaping me: I am formed and classified by socio-bodily perceptual habits [...] that determine my bodily possibilities here and now. Sensory habits establish and maintain social ordering through, for example, racialized and socioeconomic mechanisms that enforce habitually perceiving, controlling, and enforcing what particular bodies mean and how/where they can move in particular contexts.«<sup>74</sup> While our perceiving bodies are shaped by social norms and feed back into this social order through the meaning we make from them – and it is important to recognize the impact of social power structures on our perception that Peckruhn notes – there is also space for resistance in and through our embodied meaning making, as she emphasizes: »I am already exposed and vulnerable to the bodily effects and alignments in the world, though in my bodily experience I also embody choice and creativity, opacities of meaning, and resistances in how I-as-body live out these social and bodily perceptual habits.«<sup>75</sup>

Affect theory can provide a helpful framework for conceptualizing further this entanglement between the individual body, subjective experience, and social context. Eugénie Shinkle theorizes affect »as a cognitive mode operating between biology and the socius« in which »mental and somatic resources [are] mobilised in response to stimulus events, experienced in consciousness and registered by the body – mobile forces circulating and mediating between

73 Peckruhn, *Embodied Knowing*, 89–90 (original emphasis).

74 Peckruhn, *Embodied Knowing*, 91.

75 Peckruhn, *Embodied Knowing*, 93.

body and intellect, physiology and mind«,<sup>76</sup> and, I would add, between the individual and collective. Using affect and emotions interchangeably, Sara Ahmed further explains that emotions »operate to ›make‹ and ›shape‹ bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others«. <sup>77</sup> She thinks of emotions in terms of impressions, the pressing of bodies against each other, and the mark they leave, shaping bodies into objects to be feared or loved.<sup>78</sup> Importantly, then, the affective charge of a body or object, and the value or meaning associated with it, is not inherent to it but is the result of affects or emotions circulating among and pressing upon bodies.<sup>79</sup> Ahmed's conceptualization of emotions as impressions allows us to understand them as both moving among bodies, shaping them by pressing against them, and as something felt in a body as it is im-pressed by another, interlacing the pre-individual, individual and collective rather than placing the individual at the origin of feeling and meaning.

Drawing on affect theory, the artwork can then be understood itself as a body that actively participates in this circulation of affects, pressing against others and being impressed by them. Thus the encounter with the artwork – as well as other bodies – can be considered one moment in which the viewer's body is im-pressed by the work's body and presses back against it, something that is made concrete for example in Marina Abramović's work discussed in Chapter 2. Given the foundation of meaning making in the body, as developed above, the traces left by these circulating affects in the individual body shape the body itself as a part of the network of affective intensities which affect the meaning made from and through the experience. Both the body of the artwork and my perceiving body are thus, as Papenburg and Zarzycka put it, a »process-in-practice«,<sup>80</sup> continuously becoming in the dynamics of circulating affects and the perceptive networks of which they are a part.

What Johnson notes with regard to philosophy and Papenburg/Zarzycka with regard to aesthetic theory – the forgetfulness of the bodily dimen-

76 Eugénie Shinkle, *Uneasy Bodies: Affect, Embodied Perception and Contemporary Fashion Photography*, in: Bettina Papenburg/Marta Zarzycka (eds.), *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2013, 73–88, here 75.

77 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2015, 4.

78 Sara Ahmed, *Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others*, *Theory, Culture & Society* 21.2 (2004), 25–42, here 29–30.

79 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11.

80 Papenburg/Zarzycka, *Introduction*, 4.

sion of knowing under the influence of body-mind dualism – is also true for theology and its reflection on religious experience. In spite of Christianity's foundation in the embodied event of God's revelation in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the theological understanding of the possibility of encounter with the divine has long emphasized the disembodied spiritual dimension of the religious experience over the embodied one and the rational element of theologizing over its experiential and perceptive foundation. Larcher points out »the problem of the loss of sensuality, feeling, corporeality as dimensions mediating faith«<sup>81</sup> as one development that encourages the turn to the arts as spaces of *Sinnvermittlung*. In more recent decades, this tendency has been countered by multiple proposals, especially from feminist perspectives, to focus on the role of the body in both religious experience and its theological reflection.<sup>82</sup> From the perspective of aesthetic theology, Zordan also calls for the return to the senses in theological thinking: »We have to become attentive again to sensation as the proper dimension of the religious phenomenon«, inspired by the scriptural evidence that »the experience of faith is born from the senses«.<sup>83</sup> Pushing this thought further, Peckruhn emphasizes that it is not only the experience of faith that is grounded in our sensory perception but also its theological reflection: »When I engage in theological construction, what is imaginable, thinkable, sense-able of the divine, the salvific, the redemptive, always already builds on bodily experiences in which the world and I are made together in perception according to a given contextual logic to which we conform. [...] the threshold of me-others-world-divine is the space of my bodily sensory experiences; therefore, my theological imaginations are in/my bodily experiences.«<sup>84</sup> While Peckruhn speaks about bodily perception in general, in the context of this volume, we argue that this applies specifically to the encounter with art as aesthetic experience, not because it is a distinct sphere of experience but because here, the embodied dimension of meaning making is especially intensified

81 Larcher, *Annäherungsversuche*, 22; in the original: »das Problem des Verlusts von Sinnlichkeit, Gefühl, Leiblichkeit als Vermittlungsdimensionen des Glaubens«.

82 For a brief overview of some approaches and their critique, see for example Peckruhn, *Embodied Knowing*.

83 Zordan, *Sentire per credere*, 179; in the original: »Da recuperare, insomma, è una attenzione al sentire come dimensione propria del fenomeno religioso«, »l'esperienza della fede nasce dai sensi«.

84 Peckruhn, *Embodied Knowing*, 94.

and made conscious, as Johnson argues. Thus, the experience of art can also provide an example in which the aesthetic foundation of the human capacity for transcendence and its theological reflection can be most clearly discovered. Again with Johnson, we do not want to contrast this experiential sphere with others but instead see it on a continuum with other experiences and their contribution to human meaning making in the world.

## 7. Encounter and Presence

Building on their emphasis on aesthetics as *aisthesis*, Papenburg and Zarzycka challenge the traditional Kantian understanding of the ›proper‹ aesthetic attitude as disinterested and distanced observation. Instead, they argue for an »immersive approach where the viewer is no longer only a viewer, but rather the subject of an embodied encounter«<sup>85</sup> with the artwork which, as we would add, is also a perceiving, sensing, affecting body. If perception is a constitutive part of meaning making in the aesthetic experience, then this meaning cannot be considered as purely inherent in the work, its subject matter or form, nor be purely attributed to the intention of the artist, independently of the perceiving subject, but it emerges from their interaction. Thinking of the aesthetic experience in terms of encounter as Papenburg and Zarzycka do and as we also choose to do in this volume, highlights several structural dimensions that are significant for our foundational theological reflections: first, the encounter between viewer, artwork, and artist is an encounter among subjects; second, these subjects are embodied and material; third, the meaning emerging in their encounter cannot be ›produced‹ or predicted, nor might it be repeatable; and fourth, the space in which the encounter takes place plays a constitutive role in it. I will briefly consider each aspect in turn.

Thinking of the aesthetic experience as a meeting between subjects means that all are actively involved in the meaning-making process, and that we cannot focus solely on the human subject making meaning of the inert, material object. Taking into consideration also the presence of the artist in the work – sometimes unnoticeable, sometimes noticeable in brush strokes or the trac-

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85 Papenburg/Zarzycka, Introduction, 3.

es of the chisel on the marble, and sometimes itself the work, as in a performance – the aesthetic experience can be conceptualized as an encounter among three subjects who all affect each other and are affected and to some degree transformed by their interaction, even if in different ways. While the subjectivity of the viewer and artist as human beings might appear self-evident, the subjectivity of the artwork – a material object – might be more questionable.<sup>86</sup> Yet it is already expressed in how we think of and treat artworks. One aspect pointing towards the artwork's subjectivity is, for example, that it is considered not only as the object of the viewer's gaze but as itself looking back at the viewer, as Walter Benjamin notes in his discussion of the concept of the aura to which we return in Chapter 3. And Rainer Maria Rilke writes in his poem »Archaic Torso of the Apollo«: »here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life.«<sup>87</sup> While references to this text in the theological discussion tend to emphasize the ethical imperative I may experience in an encounter with art that changes my life, here, I want to stress the first part, Rilke's recognition that even without its head, the sculpture ›looks‹ at the viewers, and even more, sees them as who they are. As the subjects meet, each brings with them a world that it opens up to the other(s), as Ruth Illman and W. Alan Smith write: »A given work of art offers a world that can challenge and summons one as dramatically as a face-to-face encounter«,<sup>88</sup> and it is itself such an encounter. While it may be difficult to imagine a work of art – say, a painting or a sculpture – in its materiality as a subject with intentionality and agency, capable of relationship, affecting and being affected by the encounter with a viewer, Thierry de Duve notes that we do in fact treat artworks as if they were alive: »[w]e lend them human properties; we deem them to be alive [...]; we treat them with the respect due to human beings; and we reckon it's barbaric to destroy them.«<sup>89</sup> Alfred Gell also notes the agency of artworks-as-subjects: »art objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents.«<sup>90</sup>

86 See on the understanding of artworks as animated beings W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

87 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Archaic Torso of Apollo*, translated by Stephen Mitchell, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/1679348/archaic-torso-of-apollo> [accessed 15 September 2025].

88 Illman/Smith, *Theology and the Arts*, 47.

89 De Duve, *Look*, 19.

90 Alfred Gell, quoted in Michael D. Jackson, *The Work of Art: Rethinking the Elementary*

These mostly unconscious attitudes of respect in relation to artworks reflect the intuition that in the aesthetic experience, I encounter another subject in a free, mutual relationship, rather than an object given to my perusal.

However, emphasizing the relational dimension of the work's encounter with the viewer does not deny the constitutive significance of the artwork. Referencing John Dewey, Innis notes: »These effects, or powers to effect and affect, are resident in the object but are only activated in the experiential encounter in a self-reconstructing spiral of cumulation and conservation.«<sup>91</sup> The work's affective potential, »resident in the object«, is awakened in the encounter with the viewer, yet not as the result of the viewer's action upon the artwork but as a moment of mutual engagement. Referencing a description of an aesthetic encounter by Siri Hustvedt, Innis writes: »This animation is not some form of deliberate or willful operative action performed on the art product, the material work of art, which is itself tensively passive, filled with potencies. There is rather a deep reciprocity in the encounter, a being saturated by the product that ›radiates something‹, clearly an expression of energy.«<sup>92</sup>

As an encounter between subjects, the aesthetic experience is a relationship of mutuality, of giving and receiving, entering into each other's world, and affecting each other. Artist and philosopher Nigel Wentworth writes: »each [painting and viewer] is only possible through the existence of the other. This means that when a viewer looks at a painting, and has the experience of entering the world expressed within it, this world also enters [the viewer].«<sup>93</sup> Opening up to the world of the painting and allowing it to enter into myself, I encounter »other ways of being-in-the-world than known before«, as Wentworth describes the aesthetic experience,<sup>94</sup> which may lead me to new ways of seeing myself, my relationships with others, and potentially also my relationship with the divine.

Second, these subjects are embodied and material, and their materiality matters to the insights that may emerge from their encounter. I have already

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Forms of Religious Life, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, xiv.

91 Innis, *Dimensions of Aesthetic Encounters*, 34.

92 Innis, *Dimensions of Aesthetic Encounters*, 38.

93 Nigel Wentworth, *The Phenomenology of Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 243.

94 Wentworth, *The Phenomenology of Painting*, 244.

discussed the fundamentally embodied ways of knowing which I may experience in particularly intense ways in the encounter with art, but it bears repeating that when standing in front of a painting, I am standing in front of another body in which the body of the artist is also present. Vivian Sobchack has developed this argument for the case of film in which the reception experience can be described as an intersubjective encounter between bodies that see, touch and affect each other:

Both spectator and film are uniquely embodied as well as mutually enworlded. Both the spectator and the film are unique lived-bodies, each engaged in prospecting the world according to their particular materiality and their particular intentional projects. Each is also uniquely and particularly situated, each concretely enworlded not only in the different spaces they occupy but also on a bias, that is, with a unique perspective that gives particular meaning to the space that occupies them. Nonetheless, insofar as each engages the other in a world that exceeds either of them, the spectator and the film together uniquely negotiate and constitute the significance of visual and visible existence.<sup>95</sup>

This means that the meaning emerging from the encounter between film (or other artworks) and viewer depends on their embodied presence to each other, not simply because of the necessity of something material given to be viewed and bodily senses to view but also because of the way in which all our knowing is a bodily reaching into the world and being entangled with *its* body. At the same time as the bodies of artwork, viewer and artist are foundational to the encounter between them, each also reaches beyond their own body as they are drawn into the other's world. While the body is essential to the aesthetic experience, it does not limit or constrain the experience to the empirically given; instead, in their encounter, something new emerges that transcends the given.

Thinking of aesthetic experience as an encounter of embodied subjects who enter into a mutual relationship, then, means that third, meaning can-

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95 Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 260–261.

not be ›made‹ to emerge from their encounter but is ›given‹; it is *unverfügbar*, a gift that cannot be manipulated. As subjects, the persons involved in the encounter are free and autonomous at the same time as they participate in a relationship with each other, touch each other and enter into each other's worlds. But even if they do that in a moment of revelation and thus gift each other insight, they can never fully be known but will always remain a mystery to each other as beings of freedom. Thus, the encounter between viewer and artwork is marked by the dialectic of knowing and unknowing, presence and absence, the momentary revelation of meaning and its withdrawal and hiddenness. Instead of Kant's ideal of disinterested observation, the most appropriate attitude in aesthetic experience may then be one of openness and receptivity: openness to the work that may change me as we encounter each other, as Zordan writes,<sup>96</sup> openness to what the work may reveal – if anything at all – and, more fundamentally, openness to the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the process of reception itself and of meaning making within it.

Accepting that the process of reception and even more, its outcome, is unpredictable also reflects the recognition of the autonomy of the artwork: in contrast to the paradigm of art as the ›handmaiden‹ of theology, which is subtly present even in the understanding of art as a space of revelation – now serving the revelatory event, given that the churches themselves no longer seem to be able to provide the conditions for its occurrence –, the artwork is not expected to reveal, or even to ›mean‹. It may remain withdrawn from me, turning its eyes away. But when it does open up to me, as I open myself up to its world, it is a freely given moment of shared presence and meaning.

Thus, it needs to be made clear that the revelatory moment of the encounter with art may or may not occur, or may occur in varying intensity. Not every encounter among human subjects is one of deep knowing and sharing, and the same is true of artworks (and the artists present in them). Sometimes, we simply brush by each other in the crowd; other times, something in the other we encounter arrests our attention, calls out to us, and we respond to that call. This is the case with the artworks we discuss in this volume that called out to us and looked at us, but it does not mean that they necessarily will have the same effect on others, although hopefully our reflections will

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96 Zordan, *Sentire per credere*, 181.

resonate with readers, at least to the extent that they may recognize some elements of these encounters in their own experiences.

Finally, fourth, I briefly want to emphasize the importance of the space of the encounter with art which is not simply a neutral platform where viewer, artwork, and artist meet each other, but is both constituted by their encounter and contributes to it. This becomes obvious in the different experiences of, say, an altarpiece encountered in a church in contrast to a museum. Neither space predetermines whether it is experienced as an object of art history or a participant in religious practice. But nevertheless, contextual elements like the presence of other visitors and the proximity of other works, lighting, the closeness or distance allowed by architectural or institutional norms – all these shape the experience. But the opposite is also true: a space is constituted in its significant elements by the encounter with an artwork so that a street corner can become a sacred space through its participation in an aesthetic experience of transcendence, as we will discuss below in our chapter on street art. Space is also significant in the aesthetic encounter in the sense that the artwork's experience is shaped by its cultural context, at the same time as it is unique and personal to the subjects involved. Innis notes: »culturally informed fore-structures of perceiving and feeling guide our approach to an artwork and encounter the constraining material configuration of the canvas or text or musical and choreographic scores and diagrams, which are themselves culturally saturated.«<sup>97</sup> Thus aesthetic experience is not just an encounter among artwork, viewer, and artist in a vacuum, but, as these three subjects meet, their material and socio-cultural contexts and the conventions or norms that shape them also interact, affect, and change each other.

## 8. Overview of the Volume

The chapters collected here circle around the question of how art can be a space in which we feel something of the transcendent, a revelation of the divine, and what some characteristic or constitutive elements of this experience are. As mentioned, they were partly written for other occasions over a

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97 Innis, *Dimensions of Aesthetic Encounters*, 39.

period of several years,<sup>98</sup> and partly specifically for this volume, and so they do not claim to develop a linear argument or an overarching grand narrative about theology and the arts. Instead, they reach towards questions that intrigued us at the time of writing, sometimes circling around an issue several times, pushing further on a particular question, or also contradicting an idea considered before. While not a perfect chronological reflection of Davide Zordan's and my collaboration on aesthetic theology, they trace some of the experiences, ideas and also confusions we worked through as we returned, again and again, to these questions.

Chapters 1 to 3 approach the question of what makes an artwork ›sacred‹ from different angles. In Chapter 1, we begin with a critique of the ›classic‹ and perhaps most common-sense idea that the sacredness of an artwork is determined by its subject matter or the intention of the artist. In the discussion of Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–1652), we push back against a definition of this artwork as sacred simply because of its subject – or, for some, as profane because of how Teresa's ecstasy is rendered – and instead focus on the formal elements that constitute the sculpture as an ›event‹. This leads us to a first development of the argument that in order to discover the ›sacred‹ in art, our focus needs to be on the aesthetic experience, the moment when a work touches me and opens up to me a sense of the unity of existence that might be described as a moment of revelation of the totality of being and its ground.

Chapter 2 continues these attempts to understand the significance of the aesthetic experience emerging from the reception of an artwork in its autonomy and the possibility of this experience to be a moment of revelation. Here, we draw on Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura to trace the shift of this concept from describing an immutable quality of an artwork to a dynamic element of reception, an understanding which is incipiently present in Benjamin's own writing. We describe this experiential understanding of Benjamin's concept as the ›nomadic aura‹ and, focusing on the genre of the performance and especially the work of Marina Abramović, we argue that the aura is reintroduced as an indicator of the reciprocal relationship between work and viewer in which an experience of meaning is gifted. This chapter was written before the advent of generative artificial intelligence with its

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98 Details on the original publications can be found in the Acknowledgements.

new possibilities for automated visual creation and before NFT (non-fungible token) artworks that exist in a digital form only but with a claim of originality and ownership. Here, the question of the (dis-/re-)appearance of the aura is even more pronounced, and it remains a topic for future reflection to consider if the aura has also wandered into these new realms and under which conditions it might be experienced there.

Drawing on one of the classics of reflection on the spiritual in modern art, Wassily Kandinsky, and one of the classics of the theological engagement with modern art, Paul Tillich, and bringing them into dialogue with the aesthetic experience of Yves Klein's blue *Monochromes*, Chapter 3 continues our considerations of the possibility of experiences of the sacred or revelation in art. Here, we argue that the play between presence and absence is a constitutive element which draws the viewer into the world of the artwork and what it shows me about myself, my embodied existence and relationship with the world, opening up – for a fleeting moment – the experience of infinity and immateriality in the materiality of my existence.

In Chapter 4, Davide Zordan returns to Kandinsky's reflections on the spiritual in art, this time through the lens of Michel Henry's interpretation of Kandinsky. In his critical consideration of the phenomenologist's thoughts on aesthetics as a philosophical perspective on the transcendental conditions of human experience, Zordan develops a theological argument for the importance of the senses for religious experience. This argument is picked up in Chapter 5, in which I turn to the theological tradition to consider the notion of the spiritual senses as a way to theologize the importance of sensory perception for the experience of the transcendent. Acknowledging both the potential and limitations of Bonaventure's theory of the spiritual senses, my reflection on the sensory experience of the work *Self Growth* by Tracey Emin (2002) as an encounter with another sensorial, embodied being – that of the work and of the artist and others who left their traces in the work – leads to an attempt to delineate an aesthetic theology which remains connected to the senses as the foundation for the encounter with the transcendent in art.

The subsequent two chapters turn towards a reflection on the interaction between viewer, artwork, and space, considering the question of how the experience of art may be understood as constituting a sacred space, or put differently, a space in which the experience of the transcendent, and thus

revelation, can occur. In Chapter 6, Davide Zordan and I take up again the question of what constitutes sacred art, this time in relation to a more specific context, namely the space of the liturgy. Here, we ask ourselves how we might describe the relationship between the aesthetic form of the liturgy and the aesthetic expression in visual art in the liturgical space so that it is neither understood as a juxtaposition nor an instrumentalization. Drawing on Romano Guardini's argument that in an artwork's contemplation, a space opens up into which the viewer enters and can breathe and move freely, we discuss two specific works, Gerhard Richter's stained-glass window for the Cathedral of Cologne (2007), and Elke Maier and Georg Planer's intervention *W Erde Licht* in the Cathedral of Klagenfurt (2009). Both works encourage a different way of seeing – the seeing of seeing itself – that frees the viewer from any concerns about meaning or content. In the interaction between space, artwork and viewer, the space is created as ›sacred‹ not because it is predetermined as such by ecclesial authorities but because it becomes a space of openness and freedom, within which we can simply be and breathe.

Chapter 7, based on a first draft written with Davide Zordan which I then developed and finalized after his death, moves these considerations out into the streets of Encinitas, California. Here, we ask: if the space of the sacred does not depend on its delimitation and designation as sacred – a church, temple, shrine – but rather on the quality of the experience we make in it when encountering an artwork, what might this mean for the encounter with art in public spaces? Drawing on theories of space and the concept of heterotopia as well as the cinematic spaces of Andrei Tarkovsky and Ulrich Seidl, we argue that the space of the sacred is the liminal, heterotopic space of the crossroads in which the norms and conventions that stabilize the center are disrupted and opened for something new. The encounter with street art, such as the work *Surfing Madonna* by Mark Patterson (2011), allows us to think further about space not as static, confining, or limited, but instead as openness, transformation, and transience, a space that is hospitable to the imaginations and visions of those who pass through it without predefining or judging them. As a space of the not-yet, of becoming, promise, and surprise, a street corner may then be called a ›sacred‹ space with greater justification than a cathedral.

In the last chapter, I turn to the musical, a genre that intrigued Davide Zordan and me because it has not received much attention in theological

reflection so far and because of its sensory and affective power which engages the viewer's embodied imagination. While we were not able to develop this chapter together before Davide's passing, I have started from our initial ideas, drawing especially on Richard Dyer's analysis of the genre's utopian imagination in the tension between transgressing ideological confines and adhering to them. Through the discussion of two film musicals, *La La Land* by Damien Chazelle (US 2016) and *Emilia Pérez* by Jacques Audiard (FR/US/MX 2024), I argue that the tensions we can trace in the utopian imagination of musicals between the human capacity for transcendence and our boundedness to the conditions of finitude and materiality show us something of the conditions for the possibility of human openness for and orientation toward God which occurs in the same dialectic between immanence and transcendence.

This last chapter might end on a more pessimistic note given the constraints of the human capacity for transcendence and thus for hearing and sensing the divine in our embodied existence which is marked not just by the limitations of our material, finite condition but also the ideological constraints of the societies we live in. Nevertheless, the chapters collected here point towards the possibility to reach, in the encounter with art, beyond the given, to sense the infinite, to experience presence – even if only for a short moment. These instances of new seeing and of sensing differently, may open up cracks in our world and gift us spaces where we breathe freely and are able to imagine otherwise: a moment of revelation and transcendence in the encounter with art.

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