Stefanie Knauss | Davide Zordan

Encountering Art

Theological Approaches to Visuality

Nomos

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Preface

When I first met my new colleague Davide Zordan, at the beginning of my post-doc at the Fondazione Bruno Kessler (back then, the Istituto Trentino di Cultura) in Trento, Italy, in 2007, we had about four or five different languages between us but none that we both spoke fluently. Nevertheless, we managed to communicate our shared interests in visual culture and arts in general, and in the cinema in particular. Davide was on the board, and later the President, of the film festival Religion Today, which still continues today in Trento, and had a vast knowledge and understanding of films of all genres and traditions, and I have enormously benefitted from his suggestions for films to watch and how to think about them. As our linguistic skills improved, we realized that we did not only share an interest in visual arts but also a particular approach to thinking theologically about the encounter with artworks, shaped by the French phenomenological tradition and foundational aesthetic theology. To this common set of resources and conversation partners, we each contributed our own particular interests and areas of expertise: for Davide, the French-Italian theological and philosophical tradition (he spent significant time in Belgium during his doctorate on the French theologian Louis Bouyet), for me, feminist and gender studies and cultural studies out of the Anglo-American context.

One day, Davide suggested to turn our informal conversations during our coffee breaks and over lunch into a more sustained reflection, which became our first co-authored article, »The ›Profane‹ Ecstasy of Saint Teresa«, originally published in Italian in the *Annali delle Scienze Religiose* in 2008 and republished as the first chapter of this volume. Writing this article was a real experience of thinking and writing together: it was not simply a matter of splicing together pieces of text written by two people but a process during which our ideas and words merged into a unified argument and text. This

was the beginning of a collaboration resulting in a series of co-authored articles and a co-edited volume on questions relating to art, cinema, imagination, faith, and theology (a bibliography of selected writings on theology, imagination, and the arts by Davide is included at the end of this volume), which also influenced our individually authored texts. I like to think that if Davide hadn't passed away much too early in 2015, we would still be discussing the latest films, our visits to museums and galleries, and our latest theological discoveries, and writing about them together. As it is, I often wonder what Davide might have thought of a particular artwork or book.

It was again Davide who, some time after I left Trento in 2011, had the idea to collect and revise some of our articles and publish them, together with new material, as a more fully developed theological reflection on visuality and visual arts. We decided together which material to include and what to add, and before his death, we were able to discuss the translations and planned revisions of previously published material and complete the draft of one of the new chapters (»Street Art as Sacred Space«, Chapter 7 of this volume). I am embarrassed to say that after Davide's death, it took more than ten years for me to conclude this last shared project. But hopefully, these intervening years have also allowed my thinking to mature some more and thus ultimately been of benefit to the volume. The Introduction, in which I provide a theoretical framing for the theological-aesthetic reflections to follow in the individual chapters, is rooted in our collaboration but also adds new material and ideas encountered since and thus reflects some of this development. Writing Chapter 8 on »The Utopian Longing of Musicals«, based on initial ideas we had brainstormed together, and the Introduction, and revising the other chapters along the lines of what we had discussed felt like being in conversation with Davide again, and I am glad that finally these ideas will be shared with others as well.

Stefanie Knauss

Acknowledgements

A project that is as long in the making as this one of course involves many individuals and institutions who have in different ways contributed to its development and finally, to its publication. First and foremost, my gratitude to Lucilla Ferraiolo, Davide's wife, for her friendship and generosity during our time in Trento and since then, and especially for her permission to revise and republish Davide's work here. Thanks to the Fondazione Bruno Kessler, in particular Antonio Autiero, the director of the Center of Religious Studies during my time there, Paolo Costa and our other colleagues, for providing the space to think about questions of art, theology, and imagination, and for their support and encouragement. My thanks to Villanova University, where I teach now, for a sabbatical in 2015 during which I was able to translate the chapters previously published in Italian and German and work with Davide on the volume during a brief research stay at Trento. I am deeply grateful that I had this last opportunity to spend time with Davide, discussing theology and art, watching films, and sharing meals, before his death the same year. For help with proofreading and bibliographies, many thanks to Joshua Johnston and Shayla Jordan, doctoral students in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova. I am especially pleased that this volume appears in a series co-edited with colleagues who also knew and appreciated Davide and his work: thank you to Anna-Katharina Höpflinger, Marie-Therese Mäder and Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati for their feedback and comments on the manuscript and for including it in the series Religion and Media we edit together. To Beate Bernstein and Tamara Kuhn at Nomos my thanks for accompanying the volume to its publication.

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* * *

This volume includes both original work (Introduction, Chapter 7 and Chapter 8), and material published previously and revised for publication in this volume:

Chapter 1 is a translation and revision of Knauss, Stefanie/Zordan, Davide, L'estasi ›profana‹ di Santa Teresa e la ridefinizione dell'arte ›sacra‹: Rilievo di un'esperienza estetica, Annali di Studi Religiosi 9 (2008), 9–27. Used by permission of FBK Press.

Chapter 2 is a translated and revised version of Knauss, Stefanie/Zordan, Davide, L'aura nomade: Riflessioni sull'incontro con l'opera d'arte a partire da Walter Benjamin, Annali di Studi Religiosi 11 (2010), 9–32. Used by permission of FBK Press.

Chapter 3 is a translation, with revisions, of Zordan, Davide/Knauss, Stefanie, Presenza/assenza in blu: L'Arte, la fruizione e la trascendenza, Annali di Studi Religiosi 10 (2009), 89–109. Used by permission of FBK Press.

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Chapter 6 incorporates revised material from two articles: Knauss, Stefanie, The Language of the Senses: An Aisthetic Theology, in: Esser, Anette/Gasser-Schuchter, Christine/Grevel, Sylvia/Jasper, Alison/Rapp, Ursula (eds.), Feminist Theology and Visual Arts (Journal of the European Society for Women in Theological Research 19), Leuven: Peeters, 2011, 53–65. Used by permission of Peeters. Knauss, Stefanie, Aisthesis: Theology and the Senses, CrossCurrents 63.1 (2013), 106–121, copyright © 2013 for the Association for Public Religion and Intellectual Life. Used by permission of the University of North Carolina Press.

Chapter 7 is a translation and revision of Knauss, Stefanie/Zordan, Davide, Erde, Glas, Federn: Eine Begegnung mit zeitgenössischer Kunst im Kirchenraum, in: Wessely, Christian/Ebenbauer, Peter (eds.), Frage-Zeichen: Wie die Kunst Vernunft und Glauben bewegt. Festschrift Gerhard Larcher, Regensburg: Pustet, 2014, 167–185. Used by permission.

I am grateful to the publishers for their permission to use these texts.

Theological Encounters with Visuality
Introduction

Stefanie Knauss

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«.[1]

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-

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 visuality, 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.[2]

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

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.[3]

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.[4] Although for

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,[5] 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.[6] 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.«[7] 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.[8]

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«.[9] While he acknowledges moments of antagonism between art and religion (and also astutely notes the benefits reaped by artists, collectors, museums, the media, and

ledge, 2004, ix–x.

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

6 Roger Lipsey, The Spiritual in Twentieth-century Art [1988], Mineaola: 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«.[10] 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[11] 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 ›handmaiden‹ 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.[12]

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

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.[13] 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.«[14] 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«,[15] which – especially in contemporary art – emphasize the absence of the divine and of ultimate meaning but also

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«.[16] 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,[17] 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.«[18]

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-

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.[19] For von Balthasar, theological aesthetics is »a theology which […] develops its theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself with genuinely theological methods.«[20] 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-

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‹.[21] 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.[22] 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.[23] 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 – reinstituting the scholastic separation between nature and super-nature he attempted to overcome.[24] 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.

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«,[25] which constitutes for him a »betraying and selling out theological substance to the current viewpoints of an inner-worldly theory of beauty«.[26] 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 ›aisthetic‹ – 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,[27] 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.«[28] Focusing

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.[29]

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

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.«[30]

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‹.«[31] 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,[32] 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.[33] But in our view, the experience of art does not function within a clear distinction between a vertical and horizontal dimension of transcendence – the

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«.[34] 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.«[35] 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«.[36] 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-

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.[37] 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,[38] 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.

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.«[39] 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.«[40] 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.«[41] Faith itself may be called »a new perception, a new imagination«,[42] 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‹«.[43] With Newman, Gallagher notes that »certitude does not depend on reasoning but on the capacity to imagine«.[44] 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

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, uno 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,[45] 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.[46] 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.«[47] 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«.[48] 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.[49] 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,[50] 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,[51] and thus a connecting point or shared characteristic of both given its mediating and epistemological functions, provides a foundation for our endeavor

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.‹«[52] 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.[53]

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*.«[54] 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.«[55] 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.[56]

With his argument about the bodily foundation in sensory – that is, aisthetic – 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

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.[57] 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.[58] 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.[59]

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.[60] 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.[61]

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

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.[62] 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.«[63] 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«[64] and are a means of knowledge, ethics and pleasure,[65] without distinguishing between these forms of engaging the world.

Johnson captures this insight in the notion of the »embodied mind«:[66] 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«.[67] 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.[68] Relatedly, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio argues for the significance of emotions and feelings as nonconscious and conscious, embodied (although not innate)

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.[69]

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«.[70] 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.«[71] 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.[72]

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

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.«[73] 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.«[74] 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.«[75]

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«,[76] 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«.[77] 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.[78] 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.[79] 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«,[80] 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«[81] 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.[82] 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«.[83] 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.«[84] 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 aisthetic 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 aisthetic 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«[85] 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-

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.[86] 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.«[87] 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«,[88] 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.«[89] Alfred Gell also notes the agency of artworks-as-subjects: »art objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents«.[90]

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.«[91] 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.«[92]

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].«[93] 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,[94] 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

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.[95]

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-

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,[96] 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

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.«[97] 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

97 Innis, Dimensions of Aesthetic Encounters, 39.

period of several years,[98] 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

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 aeisthetic 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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Chapter 1
The ›Profane‹ Ecstasy of Saint Teresa
Reconsidering ›Sacred‹ Art and the Spiritual Significance of Aesthetic Experience

Stefanie Knauss and Davide Zordan

1. Introduction

What does it mean to talk about ›sacred art‹? Are we referring to a quality of the artwork that defines its essence, its being, as in the case of statues who become the embodiment of the divine through a ritual of purification and consecration? Or are we talking about external criteria established by a tradition and related to form or content that define the artwork and place it in service of that tradition? How could we understand this term in a way that recognizes both the autonomy and integrity of the work itself while at the same time accounting for the different ways in which it might signify for different people and in different contexts? In this chapter we propose that what qualifies art as ›sacred‹ is an event that occurs in the space or relationship between the artwork as an aesthetic object whose value resides in itself, and the viewers who are drawn into the work through its aesthetic qualities but in a way that the work does not impose itself on them. Instead, the relationship frees the viewers for themselves and allows them to know themselves and their world in a new way.

For a long time, in discussions about art, the use of the adjective ›sacred‹ has been motivated by the subject matter, the artist's intention and/or conventions defining what is sacred and how it should be represented in a giv-

en socio-cultural context. These kinds of external determinations of what is sacred have seemed quite unambiguous – an image of a saint is ›sacred‹ art, the use of a halo above the saint's head indicates ›sacredness‹ – both for a general audience and in the specific field of art history and theory, not least because for a large part of this history, art has developed primarily as a means of expressing religious feelings and ideas.

However, with the modern understanding of art as autonomous and thus its separation from the sphere of the sacred, this relationship is no longer as uncomplicated. If we think of the artwork as an aesthetic object, does it still make sense to speak of ›sacred‹ art? Scholars of aesthetics will likely reject the idea, emphasizing the autonomy of the work, while scholars of religion might affirm the legitimacy of the attribute, although with varying definitions of what ›sacred‹ means and how the sacredness of an artwork could be identified (by its subject matter, how it is used, conventions of representation etc.). Given these diverging viewpoints, the issue deserves closer attention in the attempt to overcome their differences, asking about the aesthetically plausible conditions that lead us to consider art as ›sacred‹. At the same time, this question challenges our views of artistic creation and our relationship to the forms of spirituality present in our socio-historical context where, in the North-Atlantic area, institutional religion has declined while the desire for spiritual experiences remains present and is fulfilled – among other options – through aesthetic experiences. Furthermore, to think about the sacredness of art also means to return to the foundations of art theory, to questions of what art is, how its functions are defined, and about the relationship between artwork and viewer (and creator) in the aesthetic experience.

In this chapter, as a foundation for more specific questions to be discussed in the following chapters, we argue that in order to reflect on the spiritual significance of aesthetic experience under the conditions of (post-)modernity with its changed understandings of both art and religion or spirituality, it is not helpful to depart from an ontological understanding of sacred art as the basis for any spiritual experience we make through it (i.e. that there is something sacred within the artwork no matter who looks at it, or if anybody looks at it at all). Nor do we think it is appropriate to base this evaluation on a set of criteria of what constitutes sacred art that is external to the artwork or the viewer's experience. Instead, we argue that the spiritual significance of art unfolds in the encounter between artwork and viewer, in which the horizon of each

is put into question, expanded, and enriched by the other in the moment of being in each other's presence and its aftermath, as both artwork and viewer emerge from the encounter changed (visibly or not). This refusal to objectively define what makes art sacred certainly frustrates the human desire to have the sacred as something to be grasped and perhaps controlled, there, easily accessible in front of us in this image or statue, but it reflects the sacred as precisely that which evades our control and which can be experienced only in fleeting moments as a gift, an event that we cannot conjure up or guarantee.

In order to delimit the breadth of such complex issues, we will focus in particular on visual arts. On the background of the theoretical discussion about the nature of art and the relevance of artworks, we will begin with a reflection on the aesthetic profile of artworks that are called ›sacred‹ and their significance. In a second step, we will bring these theoretical considerations in conversation with a specific example, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–1652), consciously focusing on an artwork that might be considered sacred simply due to its subject matter but whose representation of the saint has raised questions about its sacred character, in order to show more clearly the experiential aspects of the encounter with art.

Our argument is based on the conviction that in spite of the postmodern pessimism regarding the possibility to define ›art‹ and specify criteria of taste, the notion of aesthetic experience still makes sense and is inseparable from an ethical dimension of ›value‹ in the broadest sense. Thus, the moment when an artwork touches us and maybe provokes us in its familiarity or strangeness represents one of the privileged spaces of experience in which an awareness of the unity of existence in relationship to our world is communicated to us, in spite of and through all experiences of fragmentation and disorientation. Rowan Williams describes this as the capacity of art to »seek[] to reshape the data of the world so as to make their fundamental structure and relation visible.«[1] This awareness of the unity of our existence in the world encourages the development of a theory of feeling that is connected to an ethics of perception without leading to the establishment of rigid artistic canons. On the contrary, it makes space for the dissonance and irreconcilability that are manifested in art.

1 Rowan Williams, Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love, London: Continuum/Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005, 17–18.

2. The Artwork, Its Context and the Difficult Question of Value

Contemporary aesthetic theory, understood as the reflection and evaluation of artistic phenomena, has led to the critique of the notion of ›artwork‹ with its reference to practices of appreciation based on criteria that are largely external to the work itself and have been used to establish a canon of ›objectively‹ good art. Contemporary aesthetic theory criticizes the idea that was shared by the Western philosophical tradition from Plato to Hegel and Heidegger, which sees art as an extension of a particular worldview, based on the philosophical notion of the ›truth in art‹ that is available to be communicated in the artwork. The critique of the philosophical determination of art has led to the ›normalization‹ of products of artistic creation that are now seen as social objects organized according to the logic of cultural institutions such as museums or art critics (and not least, the art market). This disenchantment is accompanied by the idea of the mechanical reproducibility of art, to which we turn in the next chapter, that changes our perception of the works of the past and their value as ›originals‹. As a result, central concepts of classical aesthetic theory (genius, originality, transcendence, the eternal value of the work, etc.) have been rejected as responsible for an ideologically shaped artificiality that disregards and even inhibits individual reception.

From a phenomenological perspective, it is impossible to understand the quality of the aesthetic object aside from its experience. The viewer's attention focused on the object grounds and precedes aesthetic judgement, so that without the gift of its perception by a viewer as an artwork, it remains an ordinary object and does not achieve the status of aesthetic object.[2] The same is true for so-called sacred art. In this case, one might say that ›inadequate‹ perception relegates the sacred character of the work exclusively to external elements that are part of the socio-cultural context, such as its subject matter, but have no relation to its aesthetic value or the practice of its reception.

But what would be considered an ›adequate‹ form of reception, say, of an altarpiece of the 16th century? Would it be the type of reception practiced

2 From a different philosophical perspective, Susanne Langer also defines the artwork through the fact that it is created with at least a hypothetical audience in mind; see Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, 392.

by the faithful praying with their rosary in hand in a cathedral, or that of a tourist admiring the altarpiece in a museum as a fine example of Renaissance art? The move from the cathedral to the museum is part of a broader change in the conditions of reception that shape the behavior of viewers (such as the emphasis on distance, vision, and a stance of objectivity) with the corresponding development of specific practices and languages of aesthetic experience. The perception of the work and the experience originating in it are deeply formed by the socio-cultural conditions of a given period that influence – but do not completely predetermine – our awareness of the aesthetic and how we communicate our perceptions and feelings.

Obviously, it is impossible to abstract from contextual factors in the reception of an artwork precisely because it is not possible to step out of oneself in the moment of experience. But does this mean that the altarpiece was sacred art for an audience of past times who experienced it in a ›sacred‹ context, though it is no longer sacred when it is encountered in a museum? Certainly not, as long as we believe that aesthetic judgements depend also on the quality of the work and contain some value of truth that is not completely subject to the external conditions of reception, as we do when we insist that the sacred quality of an artwork emerges in the encounter between viewer and artwork in their respective autonomy as well as their specific relationship.

Given the complexity of the question of the sacredness of art, one might decide to talk about artworks with a religious subject matter, rather than ›sacred art‹. The scholar of art and religion Titus Burckhardt suggested this distinction which according to him allows to define the essence of sacred art without determining it solely by its subject matter. Grounded in a well-developed metaphysics, Burckhardt acknowledges the existence of artworks with a religious theme that are essentially profane but firmly denies the possibility of the opposite, that sacred art may appear in a profane form or subject matter.[3]

Burckhardt's focus on a clearly defined form and subject is certainly far removed from the contemporary acknowledgement of the diversity of cultural objects and the plurality of aesthetic experiences. Our perspective today is very different but the definition of sacred art as art with a religious theme remains important and widely shared, as debates about the appropriateness of

3 Titus Burckhardt, Sacred Art in the East and West: Its Principles and Methods, translated by Lord Northbourne, Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1967.

contemporary art for sacred spaces such as churches show which return to precisely these criteria, as we will see in Chapter 6. But is this definition satisfactory? It is certainly useful to avoid confusion, but it does not resolve the problem, it simply evades it. Limiting oneself to talking about art with a religious subject avoids thinking about aesthetic experience at all, using a purely extrinsic, unequivocal classification tied to traditional criteria without considering the autonomy of the artwork. The subject matter of the artwork to which religious value is attributed relates to a network of semantic references and relationships beyond the work which are historically determined and part of a particular linguistic and symbolic order used to represent the sacred subject matter.

The classical theory of representation defines the relationship between artwork and viewer according to the model of the work as a window to the world, open for the viewer's sovereign gaze on the world represented in the artwork. This configuration excludes, right from the beginning, the possibility that an artwork might have some value of sacredness in itself and not due to what it represents, and thus, it defines the role of the work simply as a vehicle or passageway, the inert material medium of an immaterial message. This understanding of the artwork is connected with the insistence of the Christian tradition on the ancillary, pedagogical value of the image that always pertains and testifies to the world because of its material nature. In addition, the arguments of the iconoclasts about the possible confusion between the veneration of the image and what it represents also contribute to the insistence that the more an image wants to be sacred, the less it should focus the gaze on itself but instead orient it elsewhere, elevate and sublimate it. In this paradigm, ›sacred‹ is what the work represents and what its visual discourse leads the viewer to understand but not the work itself. Art does not ›know‹ what is sacred but offers an illustration of it. The sacred is the transparency of the represented figure through which the gaze passes without diverging from its trajectory towards the absolute.

Today, this understanding of the artwork as representation has changed significantly. In contrast to the intellectual heritage briefly outlined here in which works are made the vehicle of messages communicating external realities, the artworks rebel strongly, even violently, against this idea of having something to say. Affirming its authenticity and autonomy, the artwork does not claim to represent anything anymore at all and is purely self-referential. Barnett Newman writes programmatically in 1948:

> We are reasserting [the human being's] natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions. We do not need the absolute props of an outmoded and antiquated legend. We are creating images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you […]. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, [the human being], or »life,« we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.[4]

Thus, the artwork derives its value no longer from its reference to extrinsic structures of meaning but is in itself endowed with value which is realized in its encounter with the viewer.

But even given the self-referentiality of the artwork, it cannot be denied that the spiritual element remains important for artistic creation, although it is difficult to identify how precisely. The absolute to which art still testifies appears scattered in controversial, even chaotic forms of which one cannot get a clear idea and which invite the recipients to develop their own position and perception, continuously revising their own canons of the beautiful and the sacred and how they appear in art.

In very general terms, there seem to be two typically modern ways of how art and spirituality encounter each other. The first leads toward the interiority of the individual viewer and the echo of perception in the intimacy of the subject's sensations, with the formal element reduced to the point of its disappearance (for example in Wassily Kandinsky and Mark Rothko). The second strategy is to maximize the visible in order to create a contrast that

4 Barnett Newman, The Sublime Is Now, in: Ellen G. Landau (ed.), Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, 137–139, here 139 (original emphasis). Other artists from Newman's generation expressed themselves in a similar way. What Newman says here is particularly significant because his works do not avoid the contemplative, spiritual dimension but refer to it, starting not with preexisting conventions but rather with the event character of what is depicted as total form, an expanse of a surface of pure color with its symbolic power.

rejects any specific content of the epiphany (Andy Warhol) or to arrive at a form of abstraction that is paradoxically related to reality yet autonomous from it (as with Alberto Burri or Lucio Fontana). These new configurations of art do not refer to a background of sacred traditions or conventions of representing the sacred external to the work itself but include, often painfully and confusedly, a spiritual dimension through which they can evoke aesthetic experiences that challenge both art historians and scholars of religion with their respective presuppositions about the sacred and its relationship with art.

So let's return to our opening question of how – and even why – to attempt a definition of ›sacred art‹. Given these artistic developments of modernity and postmodernity, we might arrive at an acceptable relativist conclusion, namely that everybody will see (or not) the traces of the sacred wherever they want to find them, without attributing the sacred quality of a work to its representation or the intentions of its creator. This conclusion connects with the more general hypothesis of postmodern art theory that everything can be an artwork, and thus nothing is. But the ontological relativism implied in this hypothesis does not contribute to our discussion. Even though a normative theory of art is risky, the simple renunciation of the normative concedes an indefinite power to subjective spontaneity (of those who produce art, those who look at it, and those who critique it) and, most importantly, it weakens the communicative potential of art.

3. Presence, Representation, and Expression

Modern art had good reasons to escape from the requirements of representation and reproductive references and to celebrate the disappearance of its own subject. But this celebration has to be understood for what it is: a rupture. The dramatic dimension and affective elements of this disruption of what art was traditionally considered to be, cannot be hidden, not even through its unabashed (and quite profitable) ritualization. Such a rupture is still always a movement *in via negationis*, concerned with what it knows to have lost, even if it pretends to be proud of leaving it behind. Like resentful, hurting atheists who are not yet done with calling God to account and reproach God for God's mysteriousness, art knows well that the escape from the figurative is an achievement but also its damnation.

In this sense a cautious return to an aesthetic of representation appears helpful for those who dare to propose some criteria to make possible the evaluation of aesthetic pleasure. This is the direction that phenomenological aesthetics as well as the Anglo-American school of analytical aesthetics have taken. Richard Wollheim,[5] for example, is clear about the fact that culture determines what is considered representation and how one represents. But this awareness of the cultural determination of representational conventions does not sufficiently account for the properties of an artwork. In the work, representation is not a mere symbol that replaces something else. Instead, it is the material correlation of a specific perceptive experience, a ›representative seeing‹ or ›seeing-in‹ (in contrast to seeing-as) that is distinct from both a simple looking at and an imaginative seeing that emerges from one's own imagination. With regard to painting, Wollheim describes this perceptive experience as twofold: standing in front of a painting, the viewer pays attention at the same time to the painting in so far as it is a painted surface, and to the content of what the image represents. This twofold experience of seeing-in is a phenomenological experience that is immediately given in perception. It precedes representation, understood as a reference to an external reality, which simply adds a culturally determined, external standard when it imposes itself onto the innate capacity of seeing-in.

Furthermore, the artwork has expressive qualities in the sense that representative seeing always captures in the work a reflection of a human emotion which re-enters the hermeneutical circle and becomes a guide to the viewer's perception in the process of reception. The work can express, more or less clearly, the state of mind in which it was produced or relate to the state of mind in which viewers may find themselves at the moment of reception.[6] In both cases, external references to cultural traditions, art history or the knowledge of an artist's style or œuvre certainly play a role but do not fully explain the expressivity of the artwork. The fact that an object expresses something has a unique relevance and has to be taken into account accordingly when reflecting on its representative capacity.[7]

5 Richard Wollheim, Painting as an Art, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, ch. 2.

6 Wollheim, Painting as an Art, 44.

7 Wollheim states that more precisely, expressivity has to do with the semantic element of the artwork, and if the work expresses something, it is because it has meaning. The semantic properties of language are the analogue of the expressive properties of visual arts.

Thus, the artwork in so far as it is an aesthetic object represents and at the same time expresses something. The double movement of expression and representation, based on the phenomenology of perception beyond the criteria of art history, belongs structurally to the artwork and provides the foundation for the richness and complexity of the aesthetic experience. For the recipient this means that representation cannot be reduced to a purely subjective event happening in the interiority of consciousness, »like a private spectacle«, as the French philosopher Mikel Dufrenne writes.[8] The work is not *in* the recipient; the recipient is always in front of it and the work maintains its autonomy in relation to the viewer in a paradoxical relationship to its need to be seen. Representation is not the construction of a subject onto which the presence of the work is projected because then it becomes impossible to talk about aesthetic experience in the sense that is of interest here, namely as an experience in which both the autonomy and the mutuality between artwork and viewer are safeguarded and considered essential elements of their encounter.

And yet, even though the work maintains its autonomy in front of the viewers and thus is to some extent withdrawn from them and strange to them, the aesthetic experience also includes a moment of recognition that recalls the ancient concept of mimesis, much maligned and so difficult to define.[9]

The relation is obvious in the case of poetry: a person who listens to a poem without knowing the language in which it is written can more or less freely associate whatever the sounds they are listening to are evoking for only them. Instead, the person who knows the language understands ›necessarily‹ what is communicated, in the sense that they cannot separate hearing the sounds from understanding the meaning of the words. Thus, in listening, the second person replaces a simple association with real understanding. It is not relevant here that this comprehension of what is heard is only more or less correct; in any case it results from the relation between signifier and signified that the words transmit in a shared language. Something similar happens in the case of visual arts and their reception, only that here, the recipients do not have a specific language that functions unambiguously as a code for deciphering the work, but they might have a kind of implicit knowledge and an educated sensation that results from their love and previous experience of art. Richard Wollheim, Art and Its Objects: An Introduction to Aesthetics, New York: Harper & Row, 1968, 39–41.

8 Mikel Dufrenne, The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, translated by Edward S. Casey, Albert A. Anderson, Willis Domingo, and Leon Jacobson, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 336. In the same text, Dufrenne writes: »It is the *work* which expresses. Yet the work is first of all that which it represents. For this reason, the unity of the expression also depends on the represented object« (186, original emphasis).

9 See for example Hermann Koller, Die Mimesis in der Antike: Nachahmung, Darstellung,

The work does not find its whole truth in mimesis, that is, in its similarity to something outside of itself whose evocation produces the aesthetic experience. But even in the reception of an abstract work of art, a dynamic of recognition is at work that is part of the aesthetic experience, at least in the sense of the rejection of a particular meaning or as a stimulus for the imagination.[10] In modern art, what demands recognition are not the great narratives that explain the universe but instead sparse, fragmented attempts to realize existence. Thus, the aesthetic value of a work preserves an objective element independent of the viewer and yet realized in the relationship with who looks at it. This is the case precisely because of its expressive and representative qualities which consent the recognition of its aesthetic value that reveals itself always at the intersection between the objective dimension and intentional construction in a space of osmosis between the objective and the subjective element.

Returning to the question about the possibility to speak about ›sacred art‹, it becomes clear that an artwork considered as aesthetic object is not called sacred because it references a sacred horizon beyond itself, impeding the perception of the aesthetic object as such. The artwork perceived as aesthetic object is neither symbol, nor reference, nor evocation, but instead a connection of representation and expressivity that solicits a feeling of aesthetic pleasure because of how it manifests itself for sensory perception and emotional connection. In secularized societies, viewers have come to admire Byzantine icons or Van Eyck's polyptych of the mystical lamb without necessarily belonging to the religious tradition that has inspired their existence, just like we look at Botticelli's or Memling's portraits without necessarily recognizing their models, whose identity anyways is often unknown. This lack of recognition of the subject matter, which used to be the foothold of Western cultural history in the past, is precisely what makes aesthetic appreciation possible today, liberating the artwork from the necessity to reproduce and signify in relation to an external reality so that it is able to represent

Ausdruck, Bern: A. Francke, 1954, and the application of the concept in Hans-Georg Gadamer, Art and Imitation, in: Hans-Georg Gadamer, The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, translated by Nicholas Walker and edited by Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 92–104.

10 According to Kendall Walton, even an abstract painting is representation in so far as it can offer a foundation for imaginative activity because the imagination shapes the same visual experience as an image; Kendall L. Walton, Mimesis as Make-believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

itself and as such, speak to another. Dufrenne underlines this point when he writes: »While ordinary perception seeks the meaning of the given beyond the given, the aesthetic object does not allow perception to transcend the given. Instead, perception stops and remains precisely in this given, which will not let perception break loose from it.«[11]

The sacredness of art, if and where it exists, consists precisely in the overturning of ordinary perception, when our attention is focused in the authentic and autonomous being of the aesthetic object and its presence in which the signified is within the signifier. Here, the work is able to evoke in us an affective participation through the movement of recognition-in-difference in the particular modality of representation and expressivity of the artwork. The presence of the artwork thus »makes us present to ourselves in a fresh way«, as Rowan Williams writes.[12]

This discussion has shown that the sacredness of art is not determined in the reflection of the aesthetic dimensions of the artwork: ›sacred‹ is not a characteristic of the aesthetic. And yet our analysis has paradoxically also shown that the quasi-sacred character of the artwork is precisely due to its being an aesthetic object that is offered to our secular gaze, in the attention to the pure manifestation of the artwork, its presence that cannot be reduced to external cultural conventions or ideological conditions. This theoretical gain of the aesthetic reflection that modern artistic practice has initiated and continues to sustain, allows us now to return retroactively to the artworks of the past and seek out again the aesthetic experience that is offered in them to reflect on their sacredness.

4. An Aesthetic-spiritual Experience: *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini

This theoretical reflection about the sacredness of art as grounded in aesthetic perception in the encounter with the artwork in its autonomy into which the viewer is drawn through the recognition of the presence of the artwork – as a resonance or, *in via negationis*, a sense of strangeness – through its

11 Dufrenne, The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, 123.

12 Williams, Grace and Necessity, 150.

(self-)representationality and (self-)expressivity leads us now to the analysis of a particular artwork, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptural group *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (fig. 1). Two aspects will be particularly highlighted in our analysis: first, the observation that the presence of the work in itself solicits the attention of the recipient, and that this presence allows, through a process of recognition in identification and immersion, the experience of the work's value without references to external meaning structures or value criteria. Second, the analysis will critique the possibility and usefulness of the distinction between sacred art, art with a religious theme, and profane art. It will become clear that Bernini's masterwork transcends these categories, thus opening up new perspectives on what might – or must – characterize an aesthetic-spiritual experience.

How, then, does Bernini's sculpture encourage our attentive observation, focused on the work itself in its presence, and not on something outside of the work? And how does the artist encourage the recipient's involvement in Teresa's ecstasy? The work, made of marble and gold-plated bronze, can be found in a side chapel, the Cornaro Chapel, in the Basilica Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, in place of the altarpiece. But Bernini does not simply put the sculpture in the convenient space offered by the chapel; instead, he creates a ›total‹ artwork in which the space itself, architecture, sculpture, the remembrance of the donor (Cardinal Federico Cornaro), and various religious themes join together and achieve their meaning precisely through their relationship with each other and with the audience.[13] Teresa's ecstasy is not simply shown but performed, inviting the viewers to participate in the performance. This theatrical dimension of the artwork is not surprising given that Bernini gained some experience in the field of theater in various roles and uses these competences in his design of the Cornaro Chapel.

13 Irving Lavin, Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts, vol. 1, New York: Oxford University Press/The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1980, 143–145.

Fig. 1: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa (1647–1652), marble and gold-plated bronze, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.[14]

14 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ecstasy_of_Saint_Teresa_September_2015-2a.jpg, photo by Alvesgaspar [accessed 25 January 2026].

Fig. 2: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, half-bust high-reliefs of four members of the Cornaro family, right wall of the Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.[15]

Above the altar, Teresa is represented reclining on a cloud, with an angel in front of her who is about to transverberate her body with a lance, while on the walls to the left and right of the altar eight members of the Cornaro family are shown in half-bust high-reliefs, four each in the arched openings on either side, talking among themselves or meditating on unknown subjects (fig. 2). They are shown as if facing a stage, and thus even if they do not

15 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cornaro_SM_della_Vittoria.jpg, photo by Jastrow [accessed 25 January 2026].

seem to be all too interested in what is happening to Teresa (only one of the eight looks at the altar, while the others focus on a book or on each other),[16] Bernini emphasizes the theatrical and spectacular aspect of his work and its reception process through the presence of these eight figures functioning as an audience, as well as in the spatial relationships within the chapel that are established through the various directions of the gazes of the figures.[17] Thus his *Teresa* is not an isolated, inaccessible work but is consciously put into a relationship with its spatial context and its audience – both the one made of marble, and the one of flesh and blood.

Other aspects further contribute to the interaction between work and viewers. In Bernini's design, the chapel represents an intimate space, separated from the main church and yet related to its surroundings, in which the viewer is able to enter into a direct, personal relationship with the statue. This sense of intimacy is further increased by the hidden window above the statue of Teresa that softly illuminates the chapel with the light apparently flowing down over Teresa along the gold-plated rays behind the group. As art historian Irving Lavin writes, Bernini creates in the chapel an atmosphere »midway between nothingness and reality«,[18] so that the figures, bathed in a mysterious and mystical light, seem suspended on the cloud, floating above the reality of the church building and the viewers' lives. Apart from creating an intimate atmosphere in the chapel, the softness of the light also requires attentive observation on the part of the viewers in order to be able to distinguish the details of the statue. This necessarily prolongs the attention given to the artwork and creates an involvement of the viewer with the statue that fosters proximity and identification with the work, and perhaps with what

16 According to Tom Hayes, this distanced attitude is a sign of the fact that as men, they cannot identify with Teresa's *jouissance* without losing their phallic position of power (Tom Hayes, A Jouissance Beyond the Phallus: Juno, Saint Teresa, Bernini, Lacan, American Imago 56.4 [1999], 331–355, here 352). Even if one might question the notion of the phallus, Hayes' comment helps to interpret the attitude of these men as a relationship *ex negativo* with the work and, by contrast, the fact that a relationship of intense reception can have an effect that deeply disturbs the individual's concepts and principles potentially leading to a different view of the world, and one's own place in it, something that also characterizes a spiritual experience.

17 Lavin, Bernini, 103. Hayes, on the other hand, affirms that the chapel is conceived as a »theater of divine jouissance« (Hayes, A Jouissance Beyond the Phallus, 349).

18 Lavin, Bernini, 104.

Teresa might have experienced in the vision or ecstasy, described in her autobiography, that inspired Bernini's work.[19] The sustained, patient gaze required both because of the soft lighting and the richness of details to explore, with which the viewer follows the lines of the sculptures acquires a nearly tactile quality.[20] This is the ›extra-ordinary‹ perception of which Dufrenne talked in the text quoted above, a perception that focuses fully on the artwork, without distraction from external referents or criteria, and thus allows the work to communicate with the individual.[21] This form of perceptual identification with Bernini's work may be more difficult to achieve for contemporary viewers because of the artificial lighting installed in the chapel that takes away some of the mystery and makes unnecessary the long, attentive gaze which in the past consented the immersion into the aura of the work.[22] Even if the aesthetic experience of the work has not become impossible today, as is clear from the emotionally strong reactions that the statue still solicits, it is important to note that the exterior conditions of reception can profoundly change the parameters of aesthetic experience not just in the case of the move of a work to the museum, of which we talked above, but also due to apparently less drastic changes such as the installation of electric lighting in the Cornaro Chapel.

If we move from the general design of the chapel and the sculptural group to more specific aspects, other elements underline how Bernini thought of

19 Susanne Warma argues that the experience described by Teresa in her autobiography is a vision, not, as Bernini suggests in the title of his work, an ecstasy. Her argument is based on the distinction between ecstasy and vision that Teresa herself suggested. Warma holds that Bernini consciously combined elements of an ecstasy (such as the supine position) with elements typical of a vision in order to reinforce the effect of the statue on the audience (Susanne Warma, Ecstasy and Vision: Two Concepts Connected with Bernini's Teresa, The Art Bulletin 66.3 [1984], 508–511, here 511).

20 Langer argues that sculptures connect the visible and tactile, that they make visible the space that otherwise we experience through our sense of touch; see Langer, Feeling and Form, 89–90.

21 See also David Freedberg's observations about the intentionality of reception that establishes an immediate connection between individual and work and can lead to a kind of intimacy that intensifies the relationship between seeing and desiring; David Freedberg, The Power of the Image, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 322.

22 »Aura is that which liberates response from the exigencies of convention« (Freedberg, The Power of the Image, 433). See also Chapter 2 in this volume.

the reception of the work as an immersion[23] and in how far he was able to realize his intentions. One element contributing to this immersive form of reception are the dynamics at work within the sculptural group, resulting from the composition of diagonal and vertical lines that add vivacity to the sculpture, whereas horizontal lines are absent and with them the sense of stability. In addition, the group seems suspended in a precarious equilibrium with the voluminous mass of Teresa's clothes surprisingly held in balance by just the angel's slender hand holding the lance. These compositional aspects ensure that the figures appear as if floating on the clouds, apparently without support. Furthermore, there is a strong tension going through Teresa's body as if a spasm is lifting her up,[24] corresponding with the angel's light touch of her clothes. Thus, Teresa appears suspended in a dynamic tension between the gravity of her body that pulls her down, and the divine touch that in an intimate gesture both holds her back and lifts her up: »The cherub's gesture raises the transverberation from the physical to the metaphysical plane.«[25]

This sense of movement is further reinforced by the drapery. While the angel's clothes realistically correspond to the backward movement of his arm as he prepares to repeat the transverberation of Teresa's body, the saint's clothes apparently have no connection to her body[26] but seem to be moved by her emotions or by the breath of the divine. They surround her body like fire,[27] underlining the burning of her emotions and of her mystical experience, which Teresa describes precisely as a being on fire in her account of the vision:

> the Lord desired that I see the vision in the following way: […] I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there

23 Hayes, A Jouissance Beyond the Phallus, 340.

24 Warma, Ecstasy and Vision, 511.

25 Lavin, Bernini, 111.

26 Hayes notes that in spite of the heavy, voluminous clothing, Teresa's body is made to be looked at, and its concealment increases our curiosity and motivates our view; see Hayes, A Jouissance Beyond the Phallus, 338. According to Mario Perniola, Teresa's clothing does not hide her body but instead *becomes* her body; Mario Perniola, Transiti: Filosofia e perversione, Roma: Castelvecchi, 1998, 90.

27 Lavin, Bernini, 111.

> appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there was no desire capable of taking it away; nor is the soul content with less than God. The pain is not bodily but spiritual, although the body doesn't fail to share in some of it, and even a great deal. The loving exchange that takes place between the soul and God is so sweet that I beg Him in His goodness to give a taste of this love to anyone who thinks I am lying.[28]

The composition of the figures and the drapery give the whole work a dynamic comparable to a theater scene: the angel's movement appears to be caught between the first and second transverberation, and Teresa herself is caught between falling backwards and being lifted up, with the two figures seemingly alive and ready to move – even though they are made of marble – in front of their audience. The animation of the work encourages the recipient to follow what occurs in the representation and to become a participant in the event as it unfolds, as Lavin notes: »What was new was Bernini's conception of the process of salvation not in symbolic terms but as a kind of existential ›happening‹, taking place here and now«, realized both through Teresa's experience and that of the viewers of the statue.[29] Even if the word ›salvation‹ might not have much meaning for some viewers today who nevertheless are moved by the statue – and perhaps this is in itself a sign of salvation – Lavin's observation of the dramatic aspect of the composition and its effects seems appropriate and important in order to understand the conditions under which the aesthetic experience acknowledges the work's autonomy without depriving it of meaning for the viewer.

28 Teresa of Avila, The Book of Her Life, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, introduction by Jodi Bilinkoff, Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2008, ch. 29, section 13 (p. 200).

29 Lavin, Bernini, 139.

Fig. 3: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, detail of Teresa's face.[30]

The other aspect that fosters the involvement of the viewers has often been underlined in the critical literature on the work (and not only there), and it is probably the element that makes the statue most accessible even today, and that is the emotional expressiveness of Teresa's face (fig. 3). Cognitive studies have shown that the emotions expressed on the face of a person in an image have an effect on its viewer,[31] and this expressivity allows them to identify with the person and their emotions. The case of Teresa is glaringly obvious. As Lavin argues through the comparison of Bernini's statue with other representations of Teresa's ecstasy, Bernini was the first to show Tere-

30 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Éxtasis_de_Santa_Teresa,_Gian_Lorenzo_Bernini,_Roma,_Italia,_2019_03.jpg, photo by Benjamín Núñez González [accessed 25 January 2026].

31 For a discussion with reference to the cinema and its capacity to emphasize the face and its emotions through the use of close-ups see Carl R. Plantinga, The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film, in: Carl R. Plantinga/Greg M. Smith (eds.), Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, 239–255.

sa expressing such strong emotions.[32] This choice of representation makes Teresa not just a person who seems alive, very human and individualized, but fosters the viewer's involvement in her experiences.

Above, we have talked about the element of recognition that is part of the aesthetic experience. If the artwork, a purely material object, can express something, it has to do with the possibility that I recognize in it something that relates to my human sphere, in particular the sphere of the emotions and their embodiment in mimics, gesture, and posture.[33] What does this mean in the case of Bernini's sculpture? What is the interior state, the emotions that I recognize here and that touch me in the depth of my own existence? From the title and subject – the mystical ecstasy of a saint – one can hardly expect to recognize this experience as corresponding to everyday experiences today. Since Teresa's times (16th century), mystical experiences have come to be considered as exceptional, for the most part even suspicious, as an irrational, feminine or feminized experience that is, also because of this gendered aspect, inferior to rationality.[34] Today, we talk so little about mystical experiences that we would perhaps not even recognize them if they presented themselves. Thus, it is unlikely that most viewers *recognize* in Teresa's emotions the expression of a mystical union as something familiar given their own experiences. And yet, Teresa's supine position, her head thrown back, her half-closed eyes and lips opened like for a sigh or moan,

32 Lavin, Bernini, 112. However, a similar, although less accentuated, emotionality can be noticed on Teresa's face as represented by Guido Cagnacci for the altarpiece *La Madonna con bambino e i santi Andrea Corsini, Teresa d'avila, Maddalena de' Pazzi* (1640 or earlier, San Giovanni Battista, Rimini).

33 »When we endow a natural object or an artifact with expressive meaning, we tend to see it corporeally: that is, we tend to credit it with a particular look which bears a marked analogy to some look that the human body wears and that is constantly conjoined with an inner state« (Wollheim, Art and Its Objects, 28). Similarly, in his recent proposal of a normative theory of art, Maurizio Ferraris discusses the artwork as a quasi-person that is able to solicit feelings (Maurizio Ferraris, La fidanzata automatica, Milano: Bompiani, 2007, 193). However, for Ferraris, this is a fiction invented, so to say, as a trick by the artwork, whereas for Wollheim, the decisive element is the viewer's capacity for emotional connection.

34 See Grace Jantzen for an analysis of mysticism as the repressed and other of rationality, and its positive value for the redefinition of rationality in postmodernity; Grace Jantzen, Power, Gender and Ecstasy: Mysticism in Post/Modernity, Literature & Theology 11.4 (1997), 385–402.

as she offers herself to the transverberation by the angel or the rays of (the divine) light, are reminiscent of something: of a decidedly sexual pleasure that we might very well have experienced (probably more likely than a mystical experience) or that we have seen expressed in the visual codes used in a film, in advertising or indeed pornography. The least we can say is that it appears to be an experience that is so intense and pleasurable that we would like to experience it, too, and this desire of ours immerses us even more in the work. Recognizing the depth of emotions on Teresa' face, we can identify with her, and through this identification we become a part of the work, not only as viewers but as persons who enter into a personal, real relationship that transcends the distinction between representation and presence.

The second point that we would like to develop further through the discussion of Bernini's work and its reception history returns us to the question of what characterizes ›sacred‹ art, understood not in the traditional sense of a work's representation of religious themes but in the sense in which we have discussed it here, namely as a work that solicits a deep, meaningful experience in its significant presence-in-relationship with the viewer. In this regard, it is interesting to see how Bernini's Teresa has been interpreted in often contradictory and mutually exclusive ways: as a saint *or* prostitute, as sacred art *or* vulgarity. David Freedberg's study of the emotional reactions towards artworks shows that in most people's understanding, the sensual (or less euphemistically, sexual) reaction to an artwork excludes the possibility that this may also be a religious experience, even if in reality, sexual excitement is not a rare reaction in front of ›sacred‹ works of art, which is precisely why the (often self-appointed) authorities over the fundamentals of a religious tradition may react with censorship or the destruction of images.[35] The simultaneity of sexual and spiritual experiences on the phenomenological level has been denied and inhibited on the level of theological and moral discourse in spite of traditions of sexual-spiritual experiences from the Song of Songs through medieval mysticism until today's newly emerging interests in Eastern forms of tantric spirituality.

This desire to neatly separate the sexual from the religious, the profane from the sacred, is also apparent in reactions to Teresa's ecstasy: from the beginning, viewers (and for several centuries, we only know of men's expe-

35 Freedberg, The Power of Images, 348–349.

riences) have experienced a sexual excitement in front of the statue that they considered as a contradiction or even blasphemy given the religious content of the representation. A contemporary of Bernini's writes that Bernini »pulled Teresa to the ground and made this pure virgin into a Venus, not only prostrate […], but prostituted«.[36] Fascination and rejection are inextricably interlaced in this form of reaction.[37] Along those lines, and in spite of the presence of the angel (or could it be Amor?) and the radiant divine light, the representation of Teresa's mystical experience has come to be seen as expressing an explicitly sexual meaning. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the use of the same visual conventions used in pornography in order to represent the un-representable female orgasm,[38] considered to be the product of the masculine imagination of women abandoning themselves sexually to men.[39] Because the connection between sexuality and religion has always created anxiety,[40] the statue is then judged as vulgar or profane, a corruption of the saint's integrity and of the audience's sensibilities.

So, does this mean that Bernini's *Saint Teresa* is not sacred art? Or is it an example of the typology introduced by Burckhardt, an essentially profane work of art with a religious subject? But as we said before, the simple distinction between art that represents a religious theme and profane art is not relevant at the level of aesthetic experience. Bernini's Teresa and her own writings constructively challenge and transcend the binary opposition between sacred and profane, religiosity and sexuality, showing Teresa's ecstasy as an experience of divine love, an experience that we might call erotic

36 Anonymous, quoted in Lavin, Bernini, 121.

37 What is and always has been disturbing in Bernini's work is perhaps precisely the fact that it so sharply points out two different but coinciding ambivalences that have accompanied Christian history: the ambivalence regarding the image (icon or idol), and the one regarding woman (saint or prostitute). According to Régis Debray, the two are not that different because »[l']amour-haine de la femme (sorcière et servante, crédule et croyante, diabolique et divine) se reporte sur l'idole« [the love-hate of woman (witch or servant, credulous or faithful, diabolic or divine) is transferred to the idol] (Régis Debray, Vie et mort de l'image: Une histoire du regard en Occident, Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 106).

38 See for example Lacan's interpretation according to which, without any doubt, Teresa is shown in the moment of orgasm (for a discussion of Lacan's interpretation and Luce Irigaray's response see Jantzen, Power, Gender and Ecstasy, 386–388).

39 Hayes, A Jouissance Beyond the Phallus, 338.

40 David Jasper, The Erotic and the Mystical in Postmodernity, Theology & Sexuality 11.2 (2005), 71–76, here 74.

in so far as it is characterized by relationality, passion (in its twofold meaning of pain and pleasure), the desire to be completely in and for the other, in and for the Other. As Bernini shows us, the spiritual is thus not identified exclusively with the immaterial or invisible but grounded in and emerging from embodied, sensory experience. In Christianity, the separation between the material and immaterial has to be overcome precisely in order to experience ›grace‹ or ›salvation‹ under the conditions of embodied human existence.[41] And more in general, such a dualism also invalidates any aesthetic experience which is by definition an experience that departs from the sensory perception through which immaterial insights are evoked.

Bernini was certainly not the first to note the connection between the experience of the erotic and of mystical union, or to offer a representation of it. Numerous mystics, among them Julian of Norwich, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Rupert of Deutz, and Teresa herself, have used the erotic language of courtly love and the Song of Songs to describe their experiences of desire for and union with the divine by referring to the physical dimension of sexuality. It is up for debate whether this is a metaphorical use of such language or owed to an embodied erotic dimension in the experience of mystical union. But one cannot argue for the purely metaphorical use of erotic language in the religious context simply based on the presumed separation of sacred and profane and because of the suspicions about sexuality that inhibit the interpretation of mystical writings. Once the fear of the power of emotions and sensations has been overcome, one can see the connection between the erotic and the religious and understand that the apparent conflict between the sacred theme of Bernini's sculpture (or other artworks) and the ›carnal‹

41 Debray (Vie et mort de l'image, 111) notes this point in the context of his reflection on the status of the image in the history of Western society: »Loin d'avoir à s'en arracher, la délivrance de l'âme passe par le corps, son anciens tombeau […]. L'extérieur, c'est aussi l'intérieur. Bouleversement du ›corps spirituel‹. Rédemption du honteux: le ventre, c'est ce qui sert à chanter, la gorge à parler, et le souffle de Dieu passe par ma bouche. Il n'y a plus incompatibilité entre la jouissance du sensible et l'ascèse du salut.« [Far from having to tear itself away from it, the salvation of the soul passes through the body, its ancient tomb […]. The exterior is also the interior. A transformation of the ›spiritual body‹. Redemption of the shameful: the stomach serves to sing, the throat to talk, and the breath of God passes through my mouth. There is no longer incompatibility between the pleasure of the senses and the asceticism of salvation].

reactions[42] that it solicits is not due to an inherent incongruence between these spheres. Instead, it is the result of a human need to neatly separate the sacred/religious from the profane, a need that can never be satisfied, simply because – even if we might not like to admit that – any religious experience is necessarily an embodied experience because of our human condition.

Thus, to feel in oneself the sensual and sexual effect of the work and to recognize Teresa's sensations in the prolonged, tactile-visual perception of the statue does not negate a religious experience or debase it. On the contrary, Bernini's ›profaned‹ art becomes again, but in a new sense, ›sacred‹ art in so far as it embodies and enables to perceive the unity of body and mind in the sexual human being as the foundation of any aesthetic experience and also of a religious experience that integrates and involves all dimensions of human existence. As we said at the beginning of this chapter, the aesthetic experience that is offered in art allows us to experience the unity of human life. This unity, however, cannot be other than that of an incarnate being.

5. Conclusion: What the Work Knows about Us

The attentive, participatory reception of the sculptural group of Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* is an aesthetic experience whose specific structure, as shown in the previous section, enables a reception that may imply a spiritual experience. This spiritual experience, however, is not added onto the aesthetic experience as something external to it but completes it within the sphere of the aesthetic itself, without separating itself from the work, as Dufrenne demanded. What characterizes such an aesthetic-spiritual experience is the recognition of oneself through the participation in what the work represents and expresses, a participation that is not limited to an intellectual operation but involves the whole human being with its bodily, emotional, psychological and spiritual dimensions. Not least, for Christians, the incarnate experience of aesthetic reception gestures towards the fact of the incarnation of God's love in Jesus Christ which can be felt and tasted in human existence through the sacraments.

42 To talk about ›reactions‹ implies a variety of sensations, from the memory of experiences similar to the one we see represented in Teresa's face to the sensual or sexual feeling experienced directly in front of the sculpture.

The analysis of Bernini's masterwork and of the experience of its reception has allowed to substantiate the thesis we proposed to discuss: to speak of ›sacred‹ art as an objective category traditionally opposed to ›profane‹ art is not a significant distinction when considering this question from the perspective of the phenomenology of the aesthetic experience in which one experiences the communicative presence of the work as an invitation to enter into its sphere and to be challenged by it. This experience is, of course, a possibility and not a necessity. We do not want to suggest a return to the idea of the ›sacrality of art‹ or the ontological conceptualization of the sacred artwork, but rather point out a possible development for the individual in the process of reception that is coherent with the structures of the aesthetic experience, safeguarding the autonomy of both artwork and viewer at the same time as they enter into a relationship.

What is characterized by this kind of sacredness is not so much the artwork itself but rather the aesthetic experience of it as a unique event that intimately involves the recipient who recognizes something in what the work communicates through its presence as expression and representation. Aesthetic experience implies the recognition of the possibility of an aesthetic ›knowing‹ through the senses, the sensory articulation of sense. That is why the aesthetic and the spiritual experience are not separated: because the latter can never be extrinsic to the former given the conditions of materiality of both human existence and the existence of the artwork.

When we approach an artwork, we know a number of things about it that inevitably play a role in our appreciation of it. Sometimes we use this information like a shield to protect ourselves, focusing on these objective aspects, such as the place of the work in art history or the artist's œuvre, in order to avoid a subjective, personal engagement with the work, but this is not the point here. The point is, instead, that the work also knows something about us, and what it knows is often something of which we may not even be aware. Of course, the work does not ›know‹ anything in the narrow sense of the word. But in its fully expressive and representative presence, it involves us in a way that challenges us to face ourselves openly as we have not been able to do before because of what the work addresses in us and knows about us that disrupts false securities and nourishes fragile hopes. Engaging in the ›adequate‹ perception of the aesthetic object with an educated and patient gaze and with alert attention means opening up a space so

that the work can move us and speak to us, unveiling what it knows about us. This knowledge of the work is precious, worthy of exploration with the same attention and care that the sacred merits.

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Chapter 2
The Nomadic Aura
Reflections on the Encounter with Art in Conversation with Walter Benjamin

Stefanie Knauss and Davide Zordan

1. Introduction

Continuing our attempts in the previous chapter to better understand the significance of the aesthetic experience emerging from the reception of an artwork in its autonomy and its possible relationship with the spiritual life, we will focus here on a central aesthetic concept of the 20th century, which is today again at the center of discussions about art and its significance: the aura, as conceptualized by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s. Departing from the radical transformations in the modes of existence of an artwork in modernity, Benjamin offers sometimes inconsistent but still valuable contributions that help to understand what is at stake in the reception of an artwork. The concept of the aura serves Benjamin's desire to focus his attention on the aspect of experience in the sphere of art. And so even if he declares the decay or disappearance of the aura, his emphasis on experience allows us to notice, instead of the aura's decay, its shifting, or a series of shifts, which can be traced in contemporary art – especially performance art – with its focus on the question of reception.

In this chapter, we will discuss our thesis of the ›nomadic aura‹, a notion that resonates with contemporary aesthetic theory yet requires clearer development. We will begin by showing that the shift from the aura as an

immutable quality of an artwork to a dynamic element of reception is in fact already present in Benjamin's text, even if it remains hidden behind his rhetoric of decay. We then use a short film about an artwork to illustrate our interpretation of Benjamin's theory and to consider the consequences of adopting the perspective of the secularization of aesthetic experience. In a third step, we will turn to contemporary art in order to trace the possible metamorphoses of the aura, especially in the digital age. Focusing on the artistic genre of the performance and its interactions with digital media, we argue that the aura returns as an effective indicator of the claim of the artwork or artistic event to introduce its audience into a space of reciprocity where a meaningful experience becomes possible. We will discuss the performances of Marina Abramović and the aesthetic experience they offer as a momentary resting point in the nomadic wanderings of the aura in contemporary art.

2. Walter Benjamin's Search for the Lost Aura

In his essay »The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction« (written in 1935), Benjamin discusses the changes in our relationship with art due to the use of new technologies of reproduction (photography, radio, and cinema) in contrast with traditional forms of reproduction such as etchings or lithography. Any change in the forms of production leads necessarily to a change in reception, and Benjamin focuses his analysis particularly on this dimension of reception with its inseparably aesthetic and political consequences. His goal is to evaluate the relationship between aesthetic questions and artistic production in the light of the transformations of modern technology, which he sees as an opportunity for the politicization of the arts and the concomitant deritualization of aesthetic objects.

Up to this point, his intention is perfectly in line with the ideas voiced by the cultural Marxists of his time, in particular Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse, with whom Benjamin edited the famous *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in Paris. Yet their reactions to his essay are quite cool and unconvinced, because Benjamin's clearly political intentions are not enough to reshape the totality of his concepts and judgements which are kept intentionally vague. Benjamin's goal is to establish the foundations

of a materialistic theory of art,[1] but his theoretical move, and in particular his thesis of the decay (*Verfall*) of the aura, does not immediately and unambiguously support this goal. On the contrary, it becomes the point of departure for a larger aesthetic debate that goes way beyond the ideological-political framework of historical-dialectical materialism and has continued all through the last century until today.

The term ›aura‹ was well known among the European cultural elite of the early 20th century. It was mostly used to describe the halo of Christ or the saints in traditional religious iconography and thus had a clearly spiritual connotation. In esoteric, particularly theosophical circles, the term was democratized, indicating the sphere of energy surrounding each being.[2] Benjamin is, as he himself admits, rather polemical in his treatment of these theosophical ideas.[3] He announces the decay of the aura as the end of the bourgeois fetishism at the basis of the cult around the singular artwork. And yet, while his revolutionary *intention* is quite explicit, Benjamin's use of the term is surprising. In particular, his analysis of the changes occurring due to modern technologies of reproduction and the resulting multiplication and massification of images is characterized by a rhetoric of loss rather than gain. From Benjamin's ideological perspective, the decay of the aura should represent an element of emancipation from the limitations of the bourgeois cult of the original work. But the tone he uses to describe this decay never conveys the satisfaction of a goal finally achieved or at least within reach, nor is it simply neutral. Instead, we note a nostalgic tone in his text that oscillates between mourning and an uncertainty as to the possibilities of survival of the aura. True, at least once Benjamin writes that »mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.«[4] But there is a clear sense of the sacrifice that this emancipation requires due to the influ-

1 That is how Benjamin describes his project in a letter to Max Horkheimer from 16 October 1935; Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Briefe, vol. 5, edited by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999, 179.

2 For the origins of the theosophical meaning of the aura, see Charles W. Leadbeater, The Aura: An Enquiry into the Natural Forms of Luminous Mist Seen about Human and Other Bodies, London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1897.

3 See his comment in Walter Benjamin, On Hashish, edited and translated by Howard Eiland, with an introductory essay by Marcus Boon, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, 58.

4 Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction, in: Walter

ence of the Hegelian paradigm of the end of art (»the fateful hour of art has struck for us«,[5] writes Benjamin to Horkheimer), which for Benjamin is a prophecy come true and yet retains a nostalgic, even desperate, note. His tone of nostalgia may also be due to his barely hidden fear that the democratization of art in the world of technology leads to the loss of the cult value of the work and, with it, of the density and intensity of the experience of reception.

This tension between his ideological assumptions of emancipation and the sense of nostalgia, between strong opinions and unexpressed regrets has ensured the long-term success of Benjamin's reflections and their fruitfulness, not at all affected by the failure of his goal to establish the revolutionary political fundament of aesthetic theory. In addition, in Benjamin's analysis, we discover an even more profound productive ambiguity. According to the sociologist Nathalie Heinich,[6] Benjamin holds the modern technologies of reproduction responsible for the loss of a property that they instead help to create. What is apparent today – for example, the fact that the mass distribution of photographic reproductions has contributed to the renewed sacralization of the original painting – was, according to Heinich, already expressed between the lines in Benjamin's essay, for example when he recognizes that »at the moment of its origin a medieval picture of the Madonna could not yet be said to be ›authentic.‹ It became ›authentic‹ only during the succeeding centuries and perhaps most strikingly so during the last one.«[7] Authenticity, that is, the aura of a work, then, is not based in the substance of the work but seems to be a socially constructed phenomenon that becomes relevant only in modernity due to the reproductive technologies that are »instrumental in differentiating and grading authenticity«.[8] At least in this case, »grading« implies intensification and not dilution or decay. So what does *Verfall der Aura* really mean? According to Heinich, what Benjamin is getting at when he talks about desacralization because of mechani-

Benjamin, Illuminations, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, Boston: Mariner Books, 2019, 166–195, here 174.

5 Benjamin, Gesammelte Briefe, 179; in the original: »uns […] hat die Schicksalsstunde der Kunst geschlagen«.

6 Nathalie Heinich, L'aura de Walter Benjamin, Actes de la recherche en Sciences Sociales 49 (1983), 107–109.

7 Benjamin, The Work of Art, 222, note 2.

8 Benjamin, The Work of Art, 222, note 2.

cal reproduction is a »reverse sacralization«,[9] which ensures through reproduction the conditions for the existence of the aura.

What Heinich desribes as a clear discrepancy in the goals of Benjamin's theory, others have interpreted as the ambivalence of the phenomenon of the aura and its decay itself. More important than the internal contradictions in Benjamin's reflections is the fact that he relies on a concept that includes a dialectical element. Jürgen Habermas, for example, underlines that the dissolution of the dialectical element in the aura would lead to the loss of the historicity of the experience of reception that instead needs to be renewed.[10] And even more explicitly, Catherine Perret affirms that »the aura is not an ambiguous concept; it is a dialectical concept appropriate to the dialectical experience whose structure it attempts to understand«.[11] The liberation of the artwork from its solitary contemplation and from the auratic wrappings that protect and isolate it – that is, its liberation from the suppression of the autonomy of the artwork and the cultural reverence towards it – have always been contained in the aura as a possibility. If this wasn't the case, after the deritualization of the artwork the recipient's experience would no longer be significant. In other words, if the aura was only a property of the work defining its sacralizing value as an original object, there would be no space for the dialectical dynamic between artwork and recipient. But this is not the case, as Habermas and Perret note. Their analysis points towards the aesthetic experience that situates the individual in front of and in relationship with the artwork. It is the reception experience, and not the artwork per se, that is most usefully discussed through the concept of the aura, whereas thinking of the dissolution or retention of the aura as a quality of the artwork would seem inconsistent. In the following section, we will re-think Benjamin's theory from this perspective, in dialogue with a specific example of the mechanical reproduction of the work of art, namely the short film *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* by Michelangelo Antonioni (*Michelangelo Eye to Eye*, IT 2004).

9 Heinich, L'aura de Walter Benjamin, 108; in the original: »sacralisation a contrario«.

10 Jürgen Habermas, Consciousness-raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin, Special Walter Benjamin Issue, New German Critique 17 (1979), 30–59.

11 Catherine Perret, Walter Benjamin sans destin, Paris: La Différence, 1992, 99; in the original: »l'aura n'est pas un concept ambigu, c'est un concept dialectique approprié à l'expérience dialectique dont il tente de penser la structure«.

3. Antonioni/Buonarroti: ›Michelangeloesque‹ Metamorphoses of the Aura

In his essay *A Short History of Photography* (first published in 1931), Benjamin proposes a first, suggestive definition of ›aura‹ which he also references in »The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction«: »What is aura? A peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be. To follow, while reclining on a summer's noon, the outline of a mountain range on the horizon or a branch, which casts its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour partakes of their presence – this is to breathe in the aura of these mountains, of this branch.«[12] The aura relates to an object whose aesthetic experience leaves an indelible imprint in the recipient. This aesthetic experience is defined through the spatio-temporal context in which the relationship between the recipient and the work can develop. The work is here not a passive object but ›appears‹ in time (»the moment or the hour«) and space, oscillating between proximity and distance. Bejamin is quick to note the ›political‹ necessity to disrupt this balance between proximity and distance (»Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range«[13]), but his addition does not reduce the dialectical character of the aesthetic experience and instead ensures its realization. To approach an aesthetic object means to allow it to appear for what it is without references to any symbolic superstructure (its cult value), in its singular and unrepeatable presence, as we noted in the previous chapter.

It might be helpful to illustrate these aspects of Benjamin's theory in reference to a concrete example. In Antonioni's short film *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo*, the experience of reception itself is studied through the means of mechanical reproduction and gives life to a new artistic expression precisely because it is mechanically reproduced. Here, the elderly director films himself during a visit to the Basilica San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome to see Michelangelo's sculptures – Moses and the tomb of Pope Julius II – after their restoration that returned the statues to their original brightness of the whitest marble (fig. 1).

12 Walter Benjamin, A Short History of Photography, translated by Stanley Mitchell, Screen 13.1 (1972), 5–26, here 20.

13 Benjamin, The Work of Art, 173.

Fig. 1: Michelangelo Buonarotti, *Tomb of Julius II* (1505–1545), white marble, San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.[14]

14 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pope_Julius_II_tomb_by_Michelangelo_04_2024_7626.jpg, photo by Mariordo [accessed 25 January 2026].

The restoration (1999–2003) was planned in a way that viewers could follow its progress on a webpage through the livestream of adjustable webcams. Thus, while the sculptures were hidden from the view of tourists in Rome, they were easily accessible in the virtual world through a technological apparatus able to reproduce not just the artwork but also its gradual return to its original state in the process of cleaning and restoration. Here, a new configuration of the dialectic between proximity and distance central to Benjamin's aura is noticeable, which creates new spaces and modes of reception. The tourists who arrive at the doors of San Pietro in Vincoli and find them closed because of the restoration are in a sense much more distant from the work than the internet user in Tokyo or São Paulo who looks at the newly cleaned Moses on their computer screen. In addition, the relationship between the original and its reproductions is complicated because only the virtual reproduction on the internet tracks the series of changes the work undergoes in the course of the restoration, of which the original, once the restoration is concluded, does not retain a trace. In all this, the transformation of what Benjamin calls the exhibition value of the artwork becomes obvious, and it is equally obvious that such transformations do not manifest the disappearance of the aura but rather its continuous renewal and repositioning under the changing conditions of the production and reception of the work.

When Antonioni agreed to make this film about Michelangelo's statues, he was already 91 years old. He had been paralyzed on his right side for 20 years due to a stroke and could no longer speak. Nevertheless, he worked on the project as far as was possible for him, as a director and also painter. *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* is a moving testimony of the dedication to art of a man who is severely limited in his means of communication. It is the expression of a feeling of consonance between person and artwork.

The film lasts a little longer than a quarter of an hour and does not include any dialogue or titles apart from the opening and closing credits. It begins with a fade-in and a shot from inside the entrance of the basilica. Slowly the light from outside the church floods the screen. A shadow moves slowly and with difficulty forward until we see the feet, then the legs, the torso and finally the whole body of the director. He stops just behind the threshold and lifts his gaze to the ceiling of the basilica. He moves forward, in a total and then medium close-up from above, while his steps echo in the deserted building. His gait is composed and elegant, rendered only slightly uneven by the

consequences of his stroke. The light from behind creates a sharp, black silhouette of the slender man, while around him the impressive architecture comes alive, bathed in the faint light that underlines movement, shapes, and rediscovered clarity. The opening sequence thus anticipates a central topic of the film: the encounter between the director's fragility and the beauty of the sculptures in their solidity. This encounter is realized in this »peculiar web of space and time« – essential to the experience of the aura, according to Benjamin – because of Antonioni's movements, pauses, and gestures as the viewer of the sculptures, and because of the construction of the filmic images, edited by Antonioni as the director of the film.

And this is not all. The encounter between sculptures and viewer is reciprocal. When Antonioni stops in front of the tomb of Julius II, which remains outside of the frame, he is still a silhouette without a face, his whole body in the frame. He stands immobile in front of the balustrade. After a cut we see a close-up of the statue of the Warrior Pope. Again a cut, and we see an extreme close-up of Julius's eyes. Only then is Antonioni framed in close-up, still from above, as if it was a point-of-view shot from the perspective of the statue, as he lifts his face slowly towards the statue (fig. 2). This underlines an aspect of the aesthetic experience that Benjamin introduces through his concept of aura, namely the power of the artwork to answer the viewer's gaze. In his essay »On Some Motifs in Baudelaire« (1938–1939), Benjamin writes: »The person we look at, or who feels he [sic] is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.«[15] Benjamin identifies the illusory dimension of the aura with the feeling of »being looked at«, to which he ascribes the capacity of evoking an empty contemplative enjoyment in the bourgeois audience. But again, Benjamin goes further. In fact, he adds in a note: »This endowment is a wellspring of poetry«,[16] and quotes Karl Kraus: »The closer the look one takes at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back.«[17] The illusion of feeling oneself »being looked at« thus is not limited to the pure negativity of an alienated infatuation. Instead, it refers

15 Walter Benjamin, On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, in: Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, Boston: Mariner Books, 2019, 103–148, here 141.

16 Benjamin, On Some Motifs, 222, note 17.

17 Karl Kraus, quoted in Benjamin, On Some Motifs, 222, note 17.

Fig. 2: Michelangelo Antonioni, *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* (*Michelangelo Eye to Eye*, IT 2004), film still.

to the broader phenomenon of giving the object, image, or word the time to appear in a distance that is at the same time proximity, that is, to appear in the space opened up by the subjectivity of the viewer, their willingness to imagine, to associate other images, to approach them poetically. When I lift my gaze in front of a statue because I feel myself looked at, as Antonioni does in the sequence described above, I am not hallucinating but allow myself to live the encounter with an artwork as a true encounter between subjects and thus to be involved in an imaginative and personal way.

Georges Didi-Huberman comments on Benjamin's dialectic between proximity and distance: »When the work of the symbolic succeeds in weaving this suddenly ›singular‹ frame from a visible object, on the one hand, it literally makes it ›appear‹ like a unique visual event, and on the other hand, it literally transforms it: for it disturbs the very stability of its aspect, insofar as it becomes capable of calling forth something distant in the close or supposedly graspable form.«[18] What Didi-Huberman captures here with great

18 Georges Didi-Huberman, Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regard, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1992, 106; in the original: »Lorsque le travail du symbolique parvient à tisser cette trame tout à coup ›singulaire‹ à partir d'un objet visible, d'une part il le fait littéralement

precision, Antonioni seems to have experienced in front of Michelangelo's sculptures in order to then pass on the evidence of this experience to the viewers of his film. Hence the film's title, *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo*, which exploits the homonymy of director and sculptor: whose gaze is it to which the title refers? Michelangelo Antonioni or Michelangelo Buonarroti, through the eyes of his sculptures? It is impossible to resolve this question, mainly because the two gazes seem inextricably intertwined through the film's editing, and also because in the moment in which I pose this question, a third gaze, mine as the viewer of the film, has already inserted itself into this exchange of gazes in the process of reception prolonged indefinitely in the technological reproduction which, as becomes clear here, does not cause the aura to disappear but instead liberates it to wander about in ever new ways.

The combination of the two Michelangelos' gazes is constructed with great attention to detail. The film does not limit itself to simply reproduce Antonioni's aesthetic experience of the sculptures. Although he uses the subjective point-of-view shot of the statue of Julius II, Antonioni the director avoids the subjective of Antonioni the viewer,[19] not only because it would be superfluous but because it would identify the camera's perspective with a particular subjective point of view and thus emphasize the primacy of the viewing subject. Instead, the film expresses the »peculiar web of space and time« in which the relationship of the I with the work is realized as a kind of mutual questioning. It is the work that is reproducible, not its reception which, however, is dramatized in the film and integrated into the space and time of the cinema. And neither is its aura reproducible which, because it is not the exclusive property of the work (»the presence of the original«[20]), can re-present itself in new forms even where the work is no longer original, provided that the quasi-intersubjective setting be preserved in which work and recipient encounter and communicate with each other. It is obvious that Antonioni's film does not aim to share with its audience the emotions of

›apparaître‹ comme un événement visuel unique, d'autre part il le transforme littéralement: car il inquiète la stabilité même de son aspect, dans la mesure où il se rend capable d'appeler un lointain dans la forme proche ou supposée saisissable.«

19 In particular, the use of vertical tracks, close-ups and long dissolves to black in the filming of the statues creates a strong sense of distance from Antonioni's subjective vision. The director uses several semi-subjectives in which, however, the sculptures remain out of focus.

20 Benjamin, The Work of Art, 170.

somebody entering the basilica and looking at Michelangelo's statues. But it testifies to Antonioni's experience of these emotions in a singular space and time which is thus not reproducible. The mise-en-scène of this singularity does not re-create the auratic density of Antonioni's singular experience but creates a new aesthetic object, this time to be experienced by many and itself an opportunity for emotion and encounter in which the aura may appear.

Antonioni's filmography is characterized by the persistent treatment of the question of vision, and in particular how in vision »*the gaze that makes the film* comes to directly question itself through the exercise of itself and its dynamic«.[21] The distance between the gaze of Antonioni the director and Antonioni the viewer leaves space in the film for the gaze of another Michelangelo, and thus guarantees that our gaze, too, can move freely within this network of gazes and access an experience that is not an imitation or repetition but a space of originality in which we are at the same time questioned and promised a new insight, a new fulfillment, or in Benjamin's terms, a finite horizon of joy.

4. The Secularized Aura and Its ›Theologies‹

Mechanical reproduction – and even more the electronic and digital one – thus does not multiply the aura of the original, but it also does not contribute to its decay. Instead, these forms of reproduction multiply and diversify the conditions of production and reception and thus the occasions for the aura to liberate itself from its bourgeois limitations. Obviously, such a multiplication of evocations of the aura and potential access points to it does not automatically increase the number and quality of aesthetic experiences. On the contrary, without a formation in aesthetic appreciation, it may contribute to that emotional and sensory decline often deplored today. The solution for this decline of taste and sensibility – if it really exists at all – is not the return to an attitude of contemplative purity that sacralizes the work in order to preserve it. The shift from the cult value of an artwork to its exhibi-

21 Lorenzo Cuccu, Antonioni: Il discorso dello sguardo: Da *Blow Up* a *Identificazione di una donna*, Pisa: ETS, 1990, 7 (original emphasis); in the original: »*lo sguardo che fa il film* giunga a mettere in causa direttamente se stesso attraverso l'esercizio di se stesso e la sua dinamica«.

tion value, as noted by Benjamin, has definitely taken place. But as we said above, Benjamin has dialectically indicated in his theory of the aura what in this passage has not been lost, at least potentially, and what remains as a promise of joy, situated in the performative character ascribed to the work that opens up the space for the encounter with its audience by virtue of its aesthetic qualities. In the measure in which the viewers respond to this invitation, they feel like they are »being looked at«, as Benjamin writes, and look back, adding intimacy and enchantment to the aesthetic experience.

Rainer Rochlitz[22] argues that what Benjamin defines as the loss of the aura should more precisely be understood as a change in its destination. If in traditional art, the aura of an object is what is communicated to God within it, in avantgarde art, photography, or cinema, the addressee is the profane audience of those who are open to transforming the world. Rochlitz underlines that Benjamin's theory of art develops from his conception of language as the power to name, as an absolute expression with God as the only addressee. The cult value of art is the consequence of this original destination and thus every further attempt by Benjamin to revoke it reflects a kind of theological hesitation. Benjamin's sincere will to put art in the service of political action never goes as far as to negate the theological roots of his thinking about art. With this theological foundation of his thought, Benjamin continues to see an occasion for joy and fullness with messianic undertones in art, even while he insists on the need to bring the artwork to the level where the destiny of the individual and the masses is at stake.

Even if Benjamin's goal in his essay »The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction« was to delegitimize any »theology of art«[23] understood as a defense of the cult value and the inaccessibility of the authentic object in the face of the revolutionary advent of photography, it is understandable that his discourse could not dispel the numerous ›theologies of the aura‹ that were inspired in various ways by his theory. These theologies are legitimate and consistent as long as they do not force the terms of the discourse and identify an original religious destination or an implicit sacred content in every aesthetic object and, instead, capture the nature of the existentially revelatory event and of the space that is opened for the intersubjective

22 Rainer Rochlitz, Le désenchantement de L'Art: La philosophie de Walter Benjamin, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992.

23 Benjamin, The Work of Art, 174.

encounter in the aesthetic experience. In this sense, Didi-Huberman's interpretation seems typical:

> It may now seem impossible – philologically, historically speaking – to evoke a »cult value« attached to the aura of a visual object without explicitly referencing the world of faith and established religions. And yet, it seems quite necessary to secularize, to re-secularize this notion of the aura – like Benjamin himself could say [in his essay »Central Park«] that »remembering is the secularized relic« in the poetic field – in order to understand something of the »strange« (*sonderbar*) and »unique« (*einmalig*) effectiveness of so many modern works which, by inventing new forms, have precisely had the effect of »deconstituting« or deconstructing beliefs, cult values, already informed »cultures«.[24]

The religious sphere offers the historical paradigm and the exemplary form of the aura. Yet the secularization of this paradigm and form does not entail the renunciation of the involvement of the subject who makes this experience in a spiritual dimension in which they become open to the promise of meaning and accomplishment. And if the analysis of this process is not the exclusive prerogative of theology, it can at least profit from the competencies of theology.

The film *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* is a good example in this regard, as well. We see Antonioni entering and moving around the sacred space of the basilica just as if he was in a museum. As we would expect given what is known about the director's biography and convictions, he does not show any religious attitude, but ›only‹, from the beginning to the end, respect

24 Didi-Huberman, Ce que nous voyons, 112 (original emphasis); in the original: »Il peut sembler désormais impossible – philologiquement, historiquement parlant – d'évoquer une ›valeur de culte‹, attachée à l'aura d'un objet visuel, sans faire une référence explicite au monde de la croyance et des religions constituées. Et pourtant, il semble bien nécessaire de séculariser, de re-séculariser cette notion d'aura – comme Benjamin lui-même pouvait dire que ›la remémoration est la relique sécularisée‹ dans le champ poétique – afin de comprendre quelque chose à l'efficacité ›étrange‹ (*sonderbar*) et ›unique‹ (*einmalig*) de tant d'œuvres modernes qui, en inventant de nouvelles formes, ont précisément eu l'effet de ›déconstituer‹ ou de déconstruir les croyances, les valeurs cultuelles, les ›cultures‹ déjà informées.« The German terms *sonderbar* and *einmalig* reference Benjamin's definitions of the aura.

and attention, a receptivity towards that which appears in front of him, a demeanor expressive of his perception that something important is happening. The cult values have shifted here, as Didi-Huberman hoped, from the level of content and symbolic forms to that of the aesthetic experience itself. And even though we know that in the film this experience, which in itself cannot be reproduced, is only represented, there is no reason to doubt that the process of filmic construction is not the same as the original aesthetic experience. Or rather: we have no other doubts than those the film itself raises. Apart from the soundtrack in the last sequences of the film, the *Magnificat quarti toni* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1591), the mise-en-scène avoids any religious references that would underline the viewer's distance from the artwork, fixing it in a transcendent horizon. On the contrary, Antonioni's gestures and attitude during his visit and his filmmaking aim at reducing this distance and eliminating it in the »peculiar web of space and time« of reception. On a first level, the elimination of distance, and thus of the typical attitude of veneration, in Antonioni's visit to the basilica results from the fact that Antonioni uses his status as a privileged visitor who is able to do what would not be permitted to an ordinary tourist: he crosses the balustrade and approaches the statue of Moses until he is able to touch it, caressing the perfect lines of the marble. On a second level, that of filmmaking, the distance is overcome through a series of close-ups of the statues in which the image is too close to permit the reconstruction of the figures as a whole. We can see the veins of the marble and its luminosity, even the traces of the chisel and of Michelangelo's precise workmanship; yet most of all, we realize that there is nothing ›else‹ to see because the contours of the figure of Moses, subject of this work of ›sacred‹ art, are not recognizable.

This twofold elimination of distance secularizes the reception and allows for new aspects of the experience to emerge, such as the tactile dimension of the aura made palpable in the sequence in which Antonioni touches the sculpture, which questions the idea (implicit for whoever engages with audio-visual media) that only the distant senses of vision and hearing are a reliable source of knowledge. The film underlines the contrast between Antonioni's fragile, uncertain hand and the full, vigorous forms of Moses's body as if it wants to capture in the director's touch of and gaze at the sculpture not just artistic competence, enchantment, and admiration, but also a kind of envy of this polished body that does not have to be afraid of growing old.

Yet the gesture of touching the statue also expresses the intimacy between the work and its recipient. Many religious traditions prohibit touching the sacred. Yet in the film, tactile contact overcomes the separation between sacred and profane and opens new dimensions in the interaction with the aesthetic object. Touching Moses, Antonioni is in solidarity with him, feels close to him and recognizes himself in the statue, perhaps in their shared incapacity to speak. Buonarroti's question of his masterpiece, ›Why do you not speak?‹, becomes a silent ›Why don't we speak?‹ that Antonioni asks the sculpture, or that perhaps they ask each other through their eyes. Of course, we can only imagine this exchange of gazes and what it might mean based on the film images. And yet this exercise of the imagination allows to reactivate the aura in this potentially infinite play of references and shifts of meaning that is the foundation of aesthetic experience.

5. The Aura in the Age of Digital Media

The question about the loss of the aura arises again, but differently, in the age of digital technologies of reproduction that have reached a level of perfection that makes the distinction between original and copy impossible and even useless. Authenticity – which for Benjamin attributes aura to an artwork – is no longer tied to the original. As Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe explain, an excellent copy of an artwork can be even more authentic than the original. The question is no longer (and it never has been for the performative arts) the distinction between original and copy but instead the quality of the copy and whether it is convincing. If that is the case, it might happen for example, as Latour and Lowe write, that »the aura of the original [of Veronese's *Nozze di Cana*] had *migrated* from Paris to Venice«,[25] where a digital reproduction of the image was exhibited. Along the same lines, Jay D. Bolter and his co-authors argue that the aura is not lost in digital media but

25 Bruno Latour/Adam Lowe, The Migration of the Aura or How to Explore the Original through Its Facsimiles, in: Thomas Bartscherer/Roderick Coover (eds.), Switching Codes: Thinking through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 275–297, here 277.

rather passes through »an ongoing crisis, in which the experience of aura is alternately called into question and reaffirmed«.[26]

Digital media do not just allow for an ever more perfect, ›original‹ reproduction, but they also enable unlimited access to the work up to the point that the audience can follow the work of restoration in San Pietro in Vincoli, enter the most famous buildings of the world with the help of virtual reality technologies,[27] or cooperate in an online artwork such as *The World's First Collaborative Sentence* created by Douglas Davis.[28] The reproducibility of technological and especially digital production processes expands possibilities of reception and production, and blurs their distinction. Given that not only the consumption but also the creative process become practices of the masses, the identification of a singular, authentic work is less important for aesthetic appreciation, whereas the singular experience of the person in front of the work – or involved in other ways in the multiple forms of its representation – is essential. The spatio-temporal co-presence with the work (Benjamin's »presence«) is now differentiated. The temporal dimension, the now, is maintained, while the spatial dimension is reconfigured: through digital mediation, *hic* and *illic* coincide in virtual reality.

In this context, the aura is no longer something that belongs to the object, be it original or copy, with all the possible migrations of the aura from one to the other that Latour and Lowe note. Instead, it emerges in the experience of encounter and communication with the work. This communicative dynamic can repeat itself without limits given the work's accessibility through the internet or digital reproductions. But the moment of each encounter itself is, every time and for every individual, unrepeatable and unique because it does not depend on an unchanging work but on a living, historical subject, and, thus, the experience can change depending on the situation, one's mood, the history of the work and of the individual who encounters it. And even the most stable object of aesthetic experience will change ever so slightly in multiple encounters, through erosion, the fading of colors, or other material processes of change, so that the same work is never encountered twice.

26 Jay D. Bolter/Blair MacIntyre/Maribeth Gandy/Petra Schweitzer, New Media and the Permanent Crisis of Aura, Convergence 12.1 (2006), 21–39, here 22.

27 Bolter/MacIntyre/Gandy/Schweitzer, New Media, 30.

28 Douglas Davis, The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991–1995), Leonardo 28.5 (1995), 381–386, here 382.

To recognize the permanence of the auratic dimension in these experiences is not obvious from the outset. There is always the risk, noted also by Benjamin, of the banalization of experience encouraged by the opacity of the digital medium. Given this risk, one might consider the performative arts, with their attention to the body and bodily movements as constitutive elements in the artwork, as the space where the aura has survived in the digital age. Bryan Turner argues that these forms of art – in particular, dance – resist technical reproduction and thus maintain the aura also in secular modernity[29] as they express, through their particular corporeal language, the sexual, political, and religious dimension of society.[30] Thus the bodies of the performer and of the recipient become the space where the aura still expresses itself despite its presumed decay – an idea that resonates with Benjamin's theory of the aura in some respects because Benjamin, drawing on the mystical tradition of Judaism, affirms that the aura can be attributed not only to an artwork, but also to nature or a person.[31]

The attempts outlined here of rediscovering the aura again in our time – in its migration from the original to the copy, its emergence in the virtual encounter, its residual presence in the body – are closely connected among each other, as the case of performance art shows particularly well to which we now turn.

6. Rediscovering the Aura in Performance

Performance was defined as an art form in the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which original and radical performances were produced by artists such as Hermann Nitsch, Piero Manzoni, or Carolee Schneemann, who focused on the re-elaboration of ritual and limit experience with the body as their primary creative material. But even before and after this period, performance

29 Bryan S. Turner, Introduction – Bodily Performance: On Aura and Reproducibility, Body & Society 11.4 (2005), 1–17, here 2.

30 Turner, Introduction, 5.

31 See Benjamin's discussion of the aura in the experience of nature (Benjamin, The Work of Art, 173) and in the human photo portrait (176), as well as his idea that in cinema, differently from theater, »for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man [sic] has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence« (180).

has been important as an art form that contests the static nature and commodification of the traditional artistic ›object‹ and introduces new forms after the preceding ones have proven unable to communicate.[32] Thus, the performance has a strong political dimension in its critique of the institutions of society and the art world which is expressed in its radical forms, actions, and materials (such as blood, intestines, acts of masochism, etc.) which often go beyond what is considered acceptable and tolerable, both for the artist and the audience.

Most characteristic of the performance is its singularity. Normally, it does not follow a script (at most there are some notes, minimal indications regarding positions in space etc.), and there are no rehearsals or roles to play. The artist is usually, though not always, also the protagonist of the performance. The performance exists only in the moment as it is produced, in the singularity of the time and space in which it is situated and for the audience that is currently present. The documentation of a performance (photos, videos, materials, accounts) can only testify to what happened, without trying to replicate the event. Nevertheless, Amelia Jones[33] notes that no reception experience is completely im-mediate: it is always part of a context by which it is influenced and that mediates the experience. Thus, the documentation of a performance is not worth less simply because of its mediated character; instead, it is different from the performance itself but can help to understand the event: for example, a photo can show particular aspects one did not notice during the performance or solicit reactions different from the ones that were evoked by it. And beyond simply helping to understand a past performance, its documentation can even become an artwork in its own right, as Abigail Levine notes about the documentations of Marina Abramović's performances: »The most successful documentations of the show seemed to stand on their own as works of art. In their revisiting, they created something new.«[34]

32 For the history of performance as an art form see RoseLee Goldberg, Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present, London: Thames & Hudson, 2001.

33 Amelia Jones, ›Presence‹ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation, Art Journal 56.4 (1997), 11–18, here 12.

34 Abigail Levine, *The Artist is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art, After Truth 7.2 (2010), https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-72/7-2-review-essays/marina-abramovis-time-the-artist-is-present-at-the-museum-of-modern-art.html [accessed 7 February 2025].

Even though one cannot assume that in the reception of a performance (whether live or through its documentation) one necessarily experiences its aura, there are some elements typical of the performance that can encourage such an experience. The first is the element of presence: the artist or other protagonists in the performance as well as the audience are co-present and create the work through their presence. According to Benjamin, the auratic potential of a work consists in rendering present, in some fashion, its origin. The aura eliminates the spatio-temporal distance between the creative act of the artist and the receptive act of the viewer, and thus in a certain way, what I see in the work (in as far as I know it is ›original‹) is the hand of the artist who paints or sculpts it. However, in the performance, there is no need for the aura to be understood in this way because there is no distance to overcome nor a moment of the past (the creative act) to revive: there is no need to *evoke* co-presence because it is *already there* in the performance.

In addition, the performance is based on reciprocity. The performance artist Marina Abramović, for example, explains that she needs the presence of the audience in order to enter into the frame of mind (and body) necessary to perform the often extreme actions planned for the performance.[35] The artist underlines that this presence does not always imply a true encounter: it can also be a form of voyeurism, a mere consumption of what the performance offers, without any real involvement on the side of the viewers.[36] Also, the artist's intense experience during the performance does not always correspond to an equally strong experience for the audience. The dissolution of the boundary between the ›work‹[37] and its audience – condition for a true encounter and thus the experience of the aura – may not always be achieved. The performance certainly offers favorable conditions for that to happen but whether the audience takes advantage of them or not depends on their willingness to let themselves be involved and expose themselves to the event every time again.

35 Janet A. Kaplan, Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović, Art Journal 58.2 (1999), 6–19, here 10.

36 Kaplan, Deeper and Deeper, 8.

37 Obviously, the term ›work‹ cannot cover the complex dynamics between the artistic action, the involvement of the audience and its spatio-temporal extension that take place in a performance. It is a work and at the same time an event.

The sense of presence that Benjamin associates with the experience of the aura is very clear in the performance which exists only in the moment and then dissolves, only leaving traces of itself, in contrast to the traditional work of art, an object that can be touched, bought, exhibited, with a history of past and future reception. This unrepeatable presence of the performance is rendered even more obvious by the frequent use of the artist's body as the center and ›raw material‹ of the performance, a living body that changes in time and thus will never be present in the same way again.

Abramović affirms that for her, the body is the central idea that she focuses on in her artistic activity: »you may have one good idea, or, if you are a genius, two. But be very careful with this. All the rest is interpretation of the same idea, and for me, the only idea I have always had is the human body. That's the only thing I have always been interested in. It's a large idea to be explored, and I always feel that I'm just at the beginning.«[38] It is therefore unsurprising that the artist has chosen the performance as her primary genre of artistic expression, precisely because of the possibilities that it offers to work with the/her body. In a successful performance, the artist creates a moment of intensified presence through her body and the experiences to which it is exposed, producing a tension that would be unsustainable outside of the sphere of the performance, and, as performance artist Jill Sigman notes, offering the possibility of a resonance between her body and the bodies of her viewers through which they are able to participate in this moment and identify with its affects.[39]

Given the importance of the artist's embodied presence for the creation of a communicative relationship between the work and its audience, one often talks about the artist's charism through which they are able to create a particular atmosphere or power in an activity that in other circumstances would appear ordinary. Without wanting to identify charism and aura, the two concepts are nevertheless related in the sense that the charism appears as a quality of the artist that contributes to creating the aura in the aesthetic encounter. Even if performances seek to dissolve the boundary between life and art – they often take place in anonymous spaces, outside of galleries and museums, and focus on ordinary experiences or activities, using materials

38 Kaplan, Deeper and Deeper, 19.

39 Jill Sigman, Live, Body-based Performance: An Account from the Field, in: Sherri Irvin (ed.), Body Aesthetics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 153–179, here 155.

from everyday life – the two spheres remain distinct because of the intense concentration of the artist which distinguishes the performance as a purposeful and intentional action from ordinary life, highlighting processes that otherwise remain unconscious or are performed automatically.

For Benjamin, the aura of an artwork is closely tied to its cultic or ritual origin and the contemplative attitude of the audience. This cultic origin is also evoked in the performances of the secular age: in his *Orgien Mysterien Theater* of the 1960s, Hermann Nitsch referred to precisely this dimension which he considered lost in the alienation of consumer society and which he wanted to bring back to true reality and primordial consciousness through his orgiastic, sacrificial rites. Abramović's performances, too, have a ritual dimension: the artist's preparation for her performances (normally she fasts and does not speak before a performance in order to purify her body and to enter into the proper frame of mind), the often repetitive gestures, her attempts to communicate something to the audience – an energy, transformation – and thus to change reality, at least for a short moment and to a small degree. Her 1997 performance *Balkan Baroque* (Golden Lion at the Biennale in Venice), for example, might be considered as a ritual of mourning and recognition of pain as the artist sits on a heap of bones which she cleans while behind her, images of her parents and herself are projected on a screen, as they dance and recount a Balkan legend.

As we have shown here, the artistic genre of the performance mirrors in several aspects what Benjamin considers characteristic of an auratic artwork: originality and authenticity, the emphasis on embodied presence, the connection with a ritual context. Is the performance then the chosen space where we re-encounter the lost aura in the age of digital reproduction? We will focus more closely on Abramović's work in order to trace an answer to this question.

7. Marina Abramović: ›The Artist is Present‹

Trained as sculptor and painter, the Serbian artist Marina Abramović (born 1946) began to realize performances in the early 1970s and soon became one of the most important representatives of this genre. In her early solo performances, she works primarily with her own body as a means of expres-

sion, exploring it as a space of pain and pleasure, the limits of what she can endure, the relationship between body and mind, body and self, the body as space of political power, body and time. An example is her performance *Rhythm 10* (1973), the reproduction of a Russian game in which the artist stabs a knife with increasing speed between her spread fingers. She changes knives every time she hurts herself (she has several of them), recording the sounds of the action. Then she listens to the recording and tries to repeat every movement, every injury, so that past and present become one in her own body.[40] The radicality of her performances demands involvement also on the part of her audience which reacts in different ways, with fascination, shock, or disgust, and in some cases even has to intervene to protect the artist's wellbeing. An attitude of detached aesthetic appreciation is not possible here; instead, the viewer is required to accept the ethical dimension of the experience: the encounter with the artwork becomes a moment of engagement and responsibility.[41] This ethical dimension is grounded in the awareness of the performer's embodied presence and vulnerability that Sigman notes: »We see the vulnerability of the performer and it tells us something about our own humanity and its many faces.«[42]

Abramović challenges her audience's capacity for ethical involvement especially in the performance *Rhythm 0*, realized in Naples in 1974. Reversing the roles of audience and artist, the artist offers herself for six hours to the audience as raw material for their creativity, providing them with 72 objects on a table that they can use on her body, such as a rose, a scarf, a lipstick, a knife, a sprig of rosemary, and even a loaded pistol. Afterwards, the artist recounted that the actions of the participants became increasingly extreme and violent, as if they lost their initial inhibitions over time.[43] But not without retaining some sense of responsibility: when somebody pointed the pistol at the artist's head, another participant in the performance stepped in and took it away. This shows how in the reception and interaction with an artwork, human freedom and responsibility are always solicited and activate each other, even if this might be less obvious when the work is a material object.

40 Cristina Demaria, The Performative Body of Marina Abramović: Rerelating (in) Time and Space, European Journal of Women's Studies 11.3 (2004), 295–307, here 297.

41 Demaria, The Performative Body, 297.

42 Sigman, Live, Body-based Performance, 160.

43 Demaria, The Performative Body, 297.

In Abramović's collaboration (and relationship) with the German artist Ulay, the central topic of their performances is the exploration of interpersonal relationships, being-one-in-two in space and time, trust and responsibility, the tensions and balances shaping a relationship. In the performance *Rest Energy* (1980), for example, Abramović holds a bow with a poisoned arrow pointing at her chest, while Ulay, standing in front of her, pulls the bowstring so that she remains unharmed only by maintaining the tension between them. This theme of tension and resistance becomes more important for the two artists over time as they explore it in long performances in which they both are immobile and silent in order to allow their energies and those of the space to coalesce and interchange.

After her separation from Ulay, Abramović continues her career by experimenting with new forms of the relationship with the audience through transitory objects.[44] In *Black Dragon* (1990 onwards), for example, the artist installs pieces of minerals on a wall in various museums. The recipients are invited to press their bodies against the stones in order to absorb their energy. Here, the exhibited objects do not have any artistic function until the audience interacts with them. The encounter is imagined as an occasion of mutual exchange: the bodies pressed against the minerals leave a trace over time and might chip or crush the object, while one assumes that the stone, too, with its energy, will change something in the person who touches it.

With this emphasis on the relationship with the audience, and their active contribution to the artwork, Abramović overcomes her personal dissatisfaction with the art form of the performance in so far as it potentially allows for passive consumption. This also means, however, that the person of the artist herself becomes less important, as in her installations of transitory objects: even if she is often present during the exhibitions, Abramović is not a part of the work which is materially composed of objects that remain neutral and impersonal[45] until somebody in the audience makes them significant. If it is possible to find the aura here, it does not emerge from the object as original creation (in fact, Abramović prefers serial production for her transitory objects), nor from the space of the exhibition (in Japan, some transitory objects were installed in front of a supermarket), nor from the artist's

44 Germano Celant/Marina Abramović, Marina Abramović: Public Body: Installations and Objects 1965–2001, Milano: Charta, 2001, 11.

45 Celant/Abramović, Public Body, 10.

charismatic presence (as she is often absent), but from the encounter with an individual which occurs every time in different ways.

Over time, Abramović has started to explore the possibilities to conserve or reproduce a performance. An interesting attempt was realized in 2010 in a show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York: *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*, a performance retrospective of Abramović's career both in traditional forms through the exhibition of videos or photos of her performances and through a series of live re-performances of her works, realized by young artists who prepared for their participation in a workshop with Abramović.[46] In addition, the artist herself offers a new performance lasting for the duration of the show. Although original, this work, too, relates back to a series of earlier performances she realized with Ulay, *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–1987), in which the two sat facing each other at a table, without talking or moving, offering themselves as a kind of *tableau vivant*. Now, in the MoMA, Abramović sits immobile at a table in the foyer and invites the visitors to the museum to sit with her for as long as they want, one at a time, and thus to participate themselves in the performance.

Even if nothing really ›happens‹ during this performance (in particular in comparison to the striking, even violent performances in the early years of the artist's career), the impact of the experience of sitting in front of the artist, who looks at them with an intense gaze, seems to be significant for the individual. In the silent, motionless encounter, without being able to use words or have direct physical contact,[47] the relationship develops through being present together, breathing together, passing time together without measuring it, creating a sense of timeless presence, apparently beyond temporal limits because the artist begins the performance before the museum opens and continues until after it closes. Both participants' overall immo-

46 Similarly, the exhibition *Marina Abramović – The Cleaner* in the Bundeskunsthalle Bonn in 2018 combines the documentation of performances with their re-performance, creating two distinct forms of experiencing Abramović's works. See also Sigman, Live, Body-based Performances, 158, on her experience as a re-performer of one of Abramović's performances in the MoMA exhibition.

47 Abramović disrupted these conditions she placed on herself during the inaugural evening of the show when her ex-partner and collaborator Ulay sat down in front of her. The example underlines the spectacular element that surrounds the artist in spite of the seriousness of her works: she is well aware of her charism and decides how and to which degree she uses it in her self-performances.

bility and silence sharpen the attention for even the slightest movement, a change in breathing, a suppressed sigh. Here, a form of encounter with the other is realized that is contrary to ordinary encounters, in which what is invisible or nearly invisible, the tiniest signal, acquires great weight in the moment of intimacy between these two strangers. From the perspective of a re-performer, Sigman describes the quality of the encounter between performer and audience as »the pathos of live performing […] a moment of recognition of [the performer's] humanity and connection to it«.[48] While Sigman speaks about a different performance, this same quality also seems to characterize the experience of those sitting with Abramović, focusing on the pure moment of encounter, without any ›message‹ other than the experience of the embodied presence of the two co-protagonists.

However, a critical reading of the performance and its set-up, with the artist as its ›star‹ at the center, is also possible, and thus viewers might ask themselves, as Abigail Levine does: »Was it a work of humble generosity and sacrifice that opened a space for unique experience for an audience, or was it a literalization of a recent art world tendency to put star power center stage?«[49] The charismatic presence of the artist is, in the ideal case, one of generous openness, but it can also be exploited for the purposes of the art market.

Starting with its title, *The Artist Is Present*, the MoMA exhibition programmatically engages the issue of presence, offering the opportunity for a number of different presences: the artist's presence in her works, varying according to the forms of their representation (documentation, live performance or live re-performance) that require in return different forms of presence from the artists and the audience who thus experience different forms of reception. The first reviews of the show were relatively negative regarding the re-performances of Abramović's performances, which were perceived as flat and empty[50] – perhaps because of the difficulty to sustain the comparison with Abramović's active presence in her own performance and with the video documentation of the ›original‹ performances placed next to the

48 Sigman, Live, Body-based Performance, 158.

49 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

50 James Westcott, Artist Marina Abramović: ›I Have to Be like a Mountain‹, The Guardian, 19 March 2010, http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/mar/19/art-marina-abramovic-moma [accessed 7 February 2025].

re-performances.[51] Previously, Abramović herself had experimented with the possibility of recreating the performances of others in *Seven Easy Pieces*, a series of performances realized at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2005. Those re-performances were, however, presented as originals, or at least as new, autonomous interpretations, whereas the re-performances at the MoMA were framed as ›reproductions‹ and integrated into other forms of documenting previous performances. Levine argues that »[i]f the reperformances become effective only in relation to the ›original‹ performance of the work, then they become a fragmentary form, another document.«[52] Instead, in order to have an affective impact, re-performances have to become performances in their own right, much like Abramović's own *Seven Easy Pieces*. This also appears to have been the artist's intention, as Levine writes: »Abramović's selection and training of performers, however, pointed the works much more in the direction of reinterpretation, of creating performances, than faithful display.«[53] The curatorial decision to place the re-performances in a historical, documentary context, however, seems to have undermined this intention and the re-performances' impact on viewers.[54] According to Levine, in the end what helped to turn the re-performances into works in their own right was their duration over three months, as long as the exhibition lasted.[55] It is important to note that it is paradoxically their continuation over an extended time that distinguishes the re-performances from their one-time originals for both performers and audiences and thus adds an element of originality that helps to make the shift from documentation to artwork.

The MoMA show also offers new ways of participating in the exhibition and potentially experiencing the aura of its works. During the opening hours of the museum, it was possible to follow Abramović's performance live through the internet thanks to a webcam pointed at the artist and the person sitting in front of her, while in the background, the legs of persons in

51 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

52 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

53 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

54 Sigman notes the varied impact of the re-performances on viewers; this is another example of the highly individual and subjective dimension of aesthetic experiences, which is precisely what makes them singular and thus open to the presence of the aura; Sigman, Live, Body-based Performances, 158.

55 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

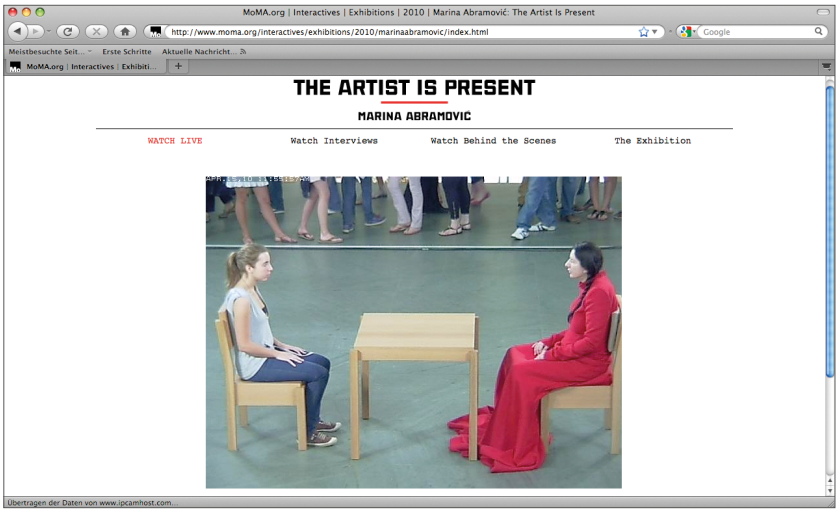

Fig. 3: Marina Abramović, *The Artist Is Present*, screenshot of the livestream of the performance, 15 April 2010.

the audience could be seen passing by, stopping, or sitting on the floor for a while, providing a sense of the audience's reactions to the performance (fig. 3). A gallery of portraits of the persons who took part in the performance was also accessible online and offered a sense of the multiple ways in which the performance was experienced given the range of expressions on their faces, from smiles to disturbance to tears. It is also important to note that the livestream of the video was interrupted after a few minutes and the user had to establish a new connection so that it was always clear that this form of participation was mediated. The streaming of the performance did not serve as documentation but made it accessible to a wider audience in new forms of reception, opening up again the question of presence and the ways to perceive it. The viewers of the livestream are not in the museum, and yet neither are they watching a film. The mediation of the performance through the internet does not cause an alienation from reality but offers a different form of experiencing the exhibition and thus a different presence of reality.

8. Conclusion

The art form of the performance – characterized by action, immediate and bodily presence, the singularity of the here and now, attention to experience, and the invitation of the audience to become personally involved – offers the conditions for the continued experience of the aura even in the age of digital media. Instead of closing the work in a protective cover as in past theorizations that tied the aura to the substance of the original work, in our conceptualization, the aura reflects the work's openness for ever-new encounters with the audience. In the reception process of the performance-event and its multiple traces (including those reproduced mechanically or digitally), the aura emerges as the gift of aesthetic experience that cannot be traced back to a past event or be limited to the permanence of an object.

Thus not only has the aura not disappeared nor decayed with the technological changes in the creation, existence, and reproduction of artworks but it seems clear now that even before these innovations, it has never been sedentary and has always migrated and reconfigured itself in new ways, always about to shift to new possibilities. If the aura indicates a quality, it inseparably belongs both to the aesthetic object and the viewer's aesthetic experience in its encounter. Only in the conjunction of object and experience appears what we can legitimately define as aura. If the aura was the intrinsic property of an artwork, it would be difficult to argue against its conceptualization as a purely historically and socially constructed phenomenon.[56] And yet, if the aura was exclusively the content of the individual subjective experience, it would not be possible to recognize and communicate it, and to evaluate its experience. Instead, the aura is precisely the space of encounter – sometimes barely touching, sometimes face-to-face, perhaps obstinate or even combative – in which the work makes itself performatively accessible and the recipient enters into the relational dynamics of the aesthetic encounter.

If the space of the aura is that of the encounter between work and audience, it becomes easier to perceive its transitory nature and to understand

56 See for example Alessandro dal Lago/Serena Giordano, Mercanti d'aura: Logiche dell'Arte contemporanea, Bologna: Il mulino, 2006, 141, for whom »l'aura di un'opera d'arte è semplicemente l'effetto che produce« [the aura of a work is simply the effect it produces]. This effect, however, depends on »insieme di cornici sociali e cognitive che fanno dell'Arte quello che è« [both the social and cognitive frames that make of art what it is] (10).

how it seems to disappear at times, because we look for the aura where it isn't, where perhaps it never has been or is no longer, as it happened to Benjamin. Or perhaps because we look for it in those moments when the aura briefly disappears in order to find a new space. Or simply because one can never be absolutely certain of its reappearance given that the experience we have of it is, as Andrew Benjamin says, »the experience of an expectation or a possibility.«[57] Thus we can make an appointment with an artwork but not with the aura: only intermittently present, and without a permanent abode, the aura might simply not show up for our meeting.

The proper place of the aura, thus, is the threshold; it lives of transitions, continuous, productive exchanges occurring in the act of reception, in the liminal space between work and viewer. Benjamin's image of the *passages* in Paris offers itself as a useful paradigm for its movements. The aura does not reveal itself where there is not the opportunity to pause, to linger so that something can happen, without being fixed into a single location. Its momentary appearance requires a space of possibility. One could also say that the aura is the product of a tension, and this refers back to the dialectical nature of Benjamin's aura that we discussed above. There is a dialectical tension between the aesthetic appearance of presence (»the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be«[58]) and its reflective, imaginative fragmentation in the experience of reception. And it is precisely this tension that causes the wanderings of the aura.

The aura emerges only in the encounter of gazes, when one feels oneself looked at by the work, which can even take the – explicit and even disturbing – form of Abramović's intense gaze directed at the visitors of the MoMA show. This understanding of the aura does not contradict Benjamin's basic idea: presence, originality, and authenticity remain fundamental but, instead of being attributed to the work itself and thus establishing the distance between work and viewer, they are conditions for the unrepeatable intersubjective encounter in the aesthetic experience. In spite of the difficulties of Benjamin's text and his vague definition of the aura, the term has become a part of the vocabulary of aesthetic theory precisely because it indicates the experience that is offered in every encounter with art, and

57 Andrew Benjamin, The Decline of Art: Benjamin's Aura, The Oxford Art Journal 9.2 (1986), 30–35, here 33.

58 Benjamin, A Short History of Photography, 20.

because of the fact that this experience requires commitment and responsibility in order to offer, in exchange, the promise of a possible fulfillment in the form of aesthetic pleasure.

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Chapter 3
Presence/Absence in Blue
Art, Reception, and Transcendence

Davide Zordan and Stefanie Knauss

1. Visual Arts and Religion in Modernity

In the first chapter, we discussed how the aesthetic reception and appreciation of an artwork can imply a spiritual experience, not because of symbolic references to a religious content situated outside of the work itself, but through the intimate participation in what the work expresses in its pure presence. We further developed this term with the help of Walter Benjamin and his concept of the aura, which, as we argue, finds a momentary resting place in the experience of presence in performance art in the second chapter. We exemplified this process in the first chapter through a discussion of the sculptural group *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–1652) by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. But while the statue of Teresa constructively challenges the definition of ›sacred‹ art, it is still a work with a religious subject. Is our argument about the spiritual experience in the encounter with an artwork that gives itself in its presence still valid when we talk about artworks that do not reference a religious context in their subject matter?

This is the question we pursue in this chapter, shifting our attention now to experiences of art in modernity and postmodernity, against the backdrop of a reflection about the theological and spiritual value of abstract art. In this discussion, we see a chance to recover the role of the aesthetic for the experience of transcendence. The theoretical framework for our reflections

is provided by the work of Paul Tillich, who has been one of the first theologians to substantially and positively discuss the questions posed to theology by visual arts in modernity. In the light of his reflections, further enriched by Wassily Kandinsky's thoughts on the spiritual in art, we then turn to the analysis of Yves Klein and his monochromatic paintings in order to show that the experience of the transcendent occurs through the play of presence and absence in the viewer's encounter with the work.

When in the early 20th century, the foundations were laid for a radical, irreversible renewal of the arts, in the religious context, figurative art kept following the traditional – and at this point, quite exhausted – formal schemata of academic taste, leading to the separation of modern (non-religious) art and religious art (as defined by its subject matter) both in form, content, and quality. As art historian James Elkins puts it quite bluntly: »Most religious art […] is just bad art.«[1] The distance between the works created for churches and those shown in museums and reaching a broad audience, also thanks to their reproduction through mass media, is paradigmatic for the difficult relationship between Christianity (perhaps especially Catholicism) and modernity.[2] While Christianity had learned to use modern rationality in order to argue its faith, it had remained deaf to the human need for emotion and sensation and thus to the aesthetic quality of its own testimony. However, both theologians and artists (as well as some art historians) have attempted to overcome this separation between art and faith, and they have made significant contributions to the theoretical reflection of the spiritual dimension of art and its reception that are still relevant today.

2. Tillich's Theology of Art

In 1959, Tillich was invited to give a lecture on art and religion at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in which he confessed that he always learned more from the works of artists than of theologians.[3] This statement might

1 James Elkins, On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art, London: Routledge, 2004, 20.

2 See also Chapters 2 (on the concept of the aura) and 6 (on the question of art and liturgical space) in this volume.

3 Paul Tillich, Art and Ultimate Reality [1960], in: Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (ed.), Art,

simply have been the rhetorical exaggeration of a famous scholar at the height of his career but Tillich was too interested in questions of visual arts to say something like this for mere *captatio benevolentiae*. Throughout his work, he makes frequent references to art, and these are not simply illustrations but closely related to the development of his theological thought. Thus Tillich can serve as an example that it might well be possible that a theologian would find more pleasure and meaning in a painted canvas than in printed books.

Tillich's ›confession‹ overturns the pedagogical argument for art in the Christian Occident which had followed Gregory the Great's view that images teach the masses of illiterates what the scriptures teach those who can read. This paradigm establishes the parallelism between text and image according to which the image is a code with a message that needs to be deciphered like a written text, with the difference that one does not need to be educated in order to understand the image. The ›content‹ of the image can be fully translated into a text, so that text and image say the same thing but in different ways and for different audiences. In contrast, Tillich implies in his statement that there is something in images that the written text cannot say, a surplus of meaning. In other words, the image does not coincide with, or is not exhausted by, its subject matter.

The question of what distinguishes the image from its subject, that is, what remains un-sayable of the image, has been posed again and again in reflections on art and philosophy. The ›image‹ is an ambivalent concept, in its apparent simplicity often misleading, for which a range of definitions have been proposed. For our reflections in this chapter, we draw on Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's description of the image as that which finds its meaning »in the specific mode of connecting the sensory and sense«.[4] The image offers the first access to sense and meaning not in what it represents but in the forms (lines, colors, textures) it traces, which are perceived through the senses, and consequently it is quite possible to find a meaning in the sensory perception of a canvas that could never be captured in the linguistic form of theological texts. Tillich's affirmation provides the basis of the aesthetic evaluation of an artwork, and with clear implications for theology, because

Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art, new rev. ed., New York: Crossroads, 1995, 219–235, here 233.

4 Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, Philosophie des images, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, 52; in the original: »dans un mode spécifique de liaison du sensible et du sens«.

according to this understanding of the image as »connecting the sensory and sense«, the ultimate reality or meaning that manifests itself in art is not limited to the subject matter of what is usually called ›sacred‹ art, as we discussed in the first chapter.

The fact that the artwork offers a meaning that is not restricted to what it represents means that the distinction between sacred and profane art based on subject matter is no longer significant and needs to be overcome, as Tillich tried to do starting in the early 1920s, in particular through overturning the hierarchies between art and religion; thus he writes: »The religious art of bourgeois society pulls the religious symbols of tradition down to the level of bourgeois morality and takes away their transcendence and their sacramental character. […] And it is not saying too much when one attributes a greater quality of sacredness to a still life by Cézanne or a tree by van Gogh than an image of Jesus by Uhde.«[5]

Tillich develops his aesthetic project in the wake of World War I, drawing in particular on German Expressionism in which he finds the signs of a revolt against the self-sufficiency of 19th-century modernity and to which he attributes a quasi-religious mission. In its rupture of form, Expressionism opens a breach through which the spiritual dimension, which was repressed and banalized in modern society, can re-emerge. For Tillich, the naturalistic reproduction of traditional religious symbols in the religious art of his time has lost any vital tension and cannot express what he considers to be the truly moral and implicitly religious disposition which instead shows itself in works that reject the academic conventions of the representation of reality and expose the alienation of human existence through their rupture of form. This rupture is necessary in order to achieve distance from the immediacy of representation and to open up a space of meaning in the aesthetic sensation which is by its very nature open to the unconditioned.

Expressionism for Tillich thus is not just a historical artistic movement but a ›style‹ that can be found at various points in art history and that implies

5 Paul Tillich, Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart, Berlin: Ullstein, 1926, 51–52; in the original: »Die religiöse Kunst der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft drückt die religiösen Symbole der Tradition auf das Niveau der bürgerlichen Moralität herab und nimmt ihre Transzendenz und ihren sakramentalen Charakter. […] Und es ist nicht zuviel gesagt, wenn man einem Stilleben von Cézanne oder einem Baum von van Gogh mehr Heiligkeitsqualität zuspricht als einem Jesusbild von Uhde.«

the radical transformation of the represented reality. Consequently, the viewer's attention is not focused on the *Inhalt* (the subject matter) of the representation but reaches its *Gehalt* (the meaning-making power or substance). The expressionist style fractures the surface of reality and explores its depths in order to produce a meaning that is not established through the subject matter of the work. Thus the religious subject of an artwork does not guarantee its religious dimension because the form or subject matter is not in itself able to evoke the *Gehalt*. Through lines, colors, and textures, the work can express but never represent the *Gehalt*. Instead, a painting that forgoes any attempt to figuratively represent a (transcendent) world allows for the internal movement beyond itself, into the transcendent.[6] Real possibilities for the spiritual in visual arts can only emerge from this renunciation of form and its visibility.

Tillich's proposal certainly raises some critical questions. His approach is shaped by his desire to establish as normative for religious art a particular style, namely expressionism, which he understands in terms that are too general to serve as more than a subjective, perhaps even idiosyncratic, criterion for identifying artworks that are able to express the unconditioned *Gehalt*. Although he claims that the expressionist style (in his use of the term) is not limited to the art historical movement of Expressionism, he does not completely avoid the temptation to identify the two. Given his focus on a generalized style, the artwork in its singularity is dismissed, and Tillich rarely analyzes particular works in greater detail (with notable exceptions, such as Picasso's *Guernica*). Today, his analyses of artworks appear dated and are clearly influenced by his own presuppositions external to the sphere of art and its critique. Also, his ideas of what constitutes ›art‹ or an artwork that is worthwhile to be discussed from a theological perspective, are limited to the canon of ›high‹ culture as the only forms of culture capable of critically breaking through the ideological indoctrination of society by the mass media, echoing Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's critique of the culture industry.[7] Nevertheless, his insights can also helpfully be applied to

6 Tillich, Die religiöse Lage, 51.

7 Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno, The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, in: Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 94–136.

other forms of culture he himself did not consider.[8] But in spite of these limitations, Tillich's contribution to theological aesthetics remains fundamental because he proposes an interpretative model that is able, first, to capture the centrality of the anthropological question, focusing on the existential relationship between the human being and the unconditioned ground of this existence and the ways in which this relationship is expressed and experienced in art, and second, to highlight the issue of meaning in its independence from the form or content of artworks. With this, he offers a new and constructive approach to the relationship between religion and modern art.

Before Tillich, this connection was openly denied or at the very least eyed with suspicion. Both theology and art history assumed the clear separation between spiritual sensibility and aesthetic taste. From the perspective of religion, modern art was bluntly accused of apostasy and of having deserted the themes and symbols of the great religious tradition,[9] whereas art historians emphasized the need to preserve the autonomy of modern art. Certainly, in that period of the emancipation of modern art in the late 19th and early 20th century, some – theologians, art historians, and artists alike – underline the continuity of a quasi-sacred or spiritual dimension at least in the reception of art, but their affirmations remain vague and unspecific and cannot serve as the basis for a substantial theological reflection. For example, the famous critic Octave Mirbeau writes about the exhibition of Claude Monet and Auguste Rodin in Paris in June 1889:

> When he [sic] enters this gallery, the visitor, even the most resistant to the pleasures of the mind, the most closed to higher understanding of art, experiences a kind of sensual power, a kind of physical agitation, in front of the dazzling light and sublime beauty of these forms. If he cannot account for the strange and powerful sensation that arises within him, analyze the nervous shocks that travel from his flesh to his brain, at least he knows that he is in the presence of something

8 Russell Re Manning, Tillich's Theology of Art, in: Russel Re Manning (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 152–172, here 166.

9 Tillich shares this critical attitude at least in part, as can be seen for example in his rather harsh judgement of Impressionist art which according to him remains limited to a self-referential naturalism.

> sacred, like a creation, of something that overpowers and violates his mental inertia and fills him with reverence, something that is none other than genius.[10]

The text shows an interesting combination of Romantic concepts (creation, genius) with a kind of cultural materialism that is attentive to biological and psychophysical reactions (physical agitation, nervous shock). In the experience of being physically jolted or shocked, which is a typical description of aesthetic experience in the late 19th century, the openness towards the religious does not disappear but is instead exalted, even though it remains without a specific object. But this »something sacred« – whose presence one perceives and which instills respect – »is none other than genius«, and once the discourse is stripped of its Romantic exuberance, nothing remains that would anchor the claim of the sacrality of art.

The idea of a physical, sensory, and even sensual participation in art and its »higher understanding«, even though promising for a theological development, is not sufficient in the absence of a coherent model that justifies the connection between the senses and sense. The Romantic exaltation of art shows that there is a need to recognize in the aesthetic experience of art the ability of consciousness to access the dimension of the spiritual. But in the theological reflections of its time, this exaltation did not find an adequate critical instrument able to engage with the challenges of modern thought.

Under these conditions, the misunderstandings could only increase between an art world that did not want to recognize other ›religions‹ next to itself and Christianity that was losing, together with its own faith, the ›religion‹ of aesthetic experience. The early 20th century represents the climax of this growing distance between art and Christianity.[11] In 1905, for exam-

10 Octave Mirbeau, Combats esthétiques, vol. 1 (1877–1892), edited by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, Paris: Séguier, 1993, 383; in the original: »Lorsqu'il entre dans cette galerie, le visiteur, même le plus réfractaire aux joies de l'esprit, le plus fermé aux supérieures compréhensions de L'Art, éprouve comme une puissance sensuelle, comme un trouble physique, devant l'éblouissement de cette lumière, et la sublime beauté de ces formes. S'il ne peut se rendre compte de la sensation étrange et forte qui naît en lui, analyser les secousses nerveuses qui remontent de sa chair à son cerveau, du moins, il sait qu'il est en présence de quelche chose de sacré comme une création, de quelche chose qui dompte et viole son inertie mentale et l'emplit de respect, de quelque chose qui n'est autre que le génie.«

11 Interestingly, even in the early 21st century, the situation does not seem to have funda-

ple, the Catholic novelist Léon Bloy denounces art as »an aboriginal parasite from the skin of the first Serpent«[12] from which one cannot expect submission to religion. The »extreme incompatibility of modern art with the demands of practical Catholicism«[13] shows for Bloy the ancient pagan foundations of art itself with which Christianity could not find a compromise apart from very brief moments of truce. In modernity, according to Bloy, it is useless to want to »*canonize* its rebellion«.[14] Even if »one can encounter exceptional unfortunates who are both artists and Christians«,[15] there is no longer any space for truly Christian art. Unsurprisingly, the arts answer back in much the same polemical tone. The painter and playwright Lothar Schreyer writes in the Expressionist journal *Der Sturm* in 1917: »The spiritual power of the artist is a reality. The spiritual power of the priest is a deception. […] The priest talks about the miracle. The artist creates the miracle.«[16]

Thus art and religion – in their antagonistic relationship – each assumes a sacredness that it denies the other and, while continuing to talk in the same language filled with references to Christian faith and spirituality, they alienate themselves from each other ever more. To resolve this situation, good will or patience are apparently not enough when the two sides of the conversation are not willing to listen to each other. Instead, in order to begin a real dialogue between modern art and religion, it is necessary to renounce one's

mentally changed. Art historians such as James Elkins and Charlene Spretnak note the absence of a robust reflection on the spiritual in contemporary art history, while aesthetic theology – although by now a well developed and more established discipline – remains marginal in theological discourse, and controversies over the religious possibilities given in contemporary art continue to arise, as we discuss in Chapter 6. See Elkins, On the Strange Place; Charlene Spretnak, The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

12 Léon Bloy, Belluaires et porchers [1905], Paris: Stock, 1922, 150; in the original: »un parasite aborigène de la peau du premier Serpent«.

13 Bloy, Belluaires et porchers, 152; in the original: »extrême incompatibilité de L'Art moderne avec les exigence d'un catholicisme pratique«.

14 Bloy, Belluaires et porchers, 152 (original emphasis); in the original: »*canonis[er]* sa rébellion«.

15 Bloy, Belluaires et porchers, 150; in the original: »il peut se rencontrer d'exceptionnels infortunés qui soient, en même temps, des artistes et des chrétiens«.

16 Lothar Schreiber, Das Bühnenkunstwerk, Der Sturm 8.2 (1917), 18–20, here 19; in the original: »Die geistige Macht des Künstlers ist eine Wirklichkeit. Die geistige Macht des Priesters ist eine Täuschung. […] Der Priester spricht vom Wunder. Der Künstler schafft das Wunder.«

own solidified expectations and to overturn presuppositions, for example by looking for the religious dimension of art precisely there where it seems *a priori* absent.

And the value of Tillich's proposal lies in its capacity to reorient the discussion and find a new point of departure. With a positive attitude towards modernity (for Tillich, theology has necessarily to be modern because it can realize itself as critical reflection of faith only in the current *kairós*) and free from the limitations of dialectical theology, Tillich overcomes the habitual opposition between religion and culture and in particular between religion and modern art. The implicit religious dimension that he discovers in Expressionism indicates for him the ways in which the spiritual quietly remains present in the forms of society and secular culture. It is in the aesthetic dimension of expressionist art that he finds the *Gehalt* that still speaks to the spirit. Thus neither form nor *Inhalt* on their own but style (the way in which form, subject matter, and underlying meaning are organized and brought together) is able to lead us beyond the naturally given appearance of things in order to express the ultimate, definitive value, that which orients our existence in its deepest dimensions and poses an unconditional challenge to it. Not the *what* but the *how* of representation motivates the appreciation of an artwork, its epistemological function, the intentional perceptive and imaginative processes that lead to an aesthetic experience that is open to the dimension of ultimate meaning, or, in Tillich's words, the ultimate concern. Distinguishing between a religious style that is dominated by *Gehalt* and an aesthetic style dominated by form, Tillich underlines that the religious value of an artwork cannot be recognized in its aesthetic qualities alone (although those do play an essential role) but in that depth dimension of the *Gehalt*.[17]

3. The *chiaroscuro* of Representation

Tillich's proposal regarding the relationship between visual arts and religion has been highly significant for theology. However, today it is clear that his theoretical foundation, the concept of *Gehalt*, is no longer sufficient to cap-

17 Manning, Tillich's Theology of Art, 159.

ture the developments in 20th-century art, in particular in abstract art. As has variously been noted, the reflection has to move forward in new directions.[18] Particularly problematic is the conception of the sacred as a preexistent content (*Gehalt*) that the work simply expresses. Even though in Tillich's theory, art is not just a window to the world or to the transcendent, he nevertheless continues to consider it as an opening towards something else that is ›out there‹ and independent of the work. Thus the underlying dynamic that requires the viewer to move away from the work in order to capture its meaning remains exactly the same as in those proposals that identify the religious dimension of a work with its subject matter's references to a religious tradition separate from the artwork. As we have shown in the first chapter in our reflections on Bernini's representation of Teresa, this view of art contradicts the insights of an aesthetic reflection that is attentive to the dynamics of reception and centers the artwork in its autonomy. In so far as it is an aesthetic object, the artwork does not evoke or refer to something else but presents a configuration of signs that stimulate the perception and solicit a feeling of aesthetic pleasure. Meaning is not added *a posteriori* to the sensory, affective relationship between viewer and work. Either meaning is already a part of perception in that relationship between senses and sense evoked by Wunenburger as quoted earlier, or it is simply an ideological construction with little or no relationship to the work and thus without any communicative effect once the socio-cultural coordinates change. But if that was the case, how would it then be possible that artworks from times long past or from other cultures are still able to address the viewers and enable experiences of meaning?

The signs traced on the surface of the canvas, the mixture and texture of colors do not ask to be deciphered like a code in order to reveal a secret message hidden underneath. In the case of avantgarde and abstract art, the visual signs programmatically reject any attempt at decoding which is considered abusive of the artwork in its autonomy, and thus artistic creation becomes an ultimate, even revolutionary practice, precisely because of its refusal to point towards a meaning beyond itself. And not only abstract art

18 Gesa E. Thiessen, Religious Art is Expressionistic: A Critical Appreciation of Paul Tillich's Theology of Art, Irish Theological Quarterly 59.4 (1993), 301–311. For a more critical reading of Tillich's conceptual system see Michael F. Palmer, Paul Tillich's Philosophy of Art, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984.

but all artworks nourish this claim to the degree that they are an expression of aesthetic elements. In the act of reception, the work demands to be perceived on its own terms in a live relationship but not ›read‹ in the sense that its interpretation refers to a meaning, real or imagined, external to the work.

What the work expresses does not belong to a different order than the one that is physically instituted by the lines, forms, and colors of which it is composed. The expressive disposition of the aesthetic object thus does not make of the artwork the signifier of a different reality signified in it. Such an understanding would mean to make an undue transfer between the work and meaning, and, although such a transfer might appear nearly automatic, it is one of the merits of abstract art to have challenged this automatism. Here, Roman Jakobson's theory of linguistic communication, and in particular his understanding of the poetic function of language, is helpful in order to understand the relationship between sensation and meaning. Jakobson notes that the definition of ›poetry‹ has changed over time, while the characteristics of the ›poetic‹ have remained the same. But where precisely does this specific element of the ›poetic‹ appear? According to Jakobson, »in this, that the word is perceived [*ressentir*] as a word and not simply as a substitute of the object it names nor as an explosion of emotion.«[19] The French verb used here, *ressentir*, means ›to sense‹, ›to perceive‹, ›to perceive again‹, and points thus again to the necessary convergence of senses and sense to which we have referred before. Jakobson's view can also be applied to visual arts, which can be considered a sign language that functions analogically to the poetic. Thus, the aesthetic value of a work appears only to the degree that its visible form is not ›sensed‹ as the imagining-of-something-else but simply for what it is: a material image, a configuration of lines and colors. The artwork is primarily that of which it is made, and this is what makes the work visible and present so that it can be encountered in an act of reception that involves the viewer as a sensory being. And this is what distinguishes the aesthetic object from an ordinary one, as the philosopher Maurice Blanchot observes: »For in the usual object (this much we know), matter itself is of no particular interest; and the more the matter that made it made it right

19 Roman Jakobson, Qu'est-ce que la poésie?, translated by Marguerite Derrida, in: Roman Jakobson, Questions de poétique, 2nd ed., Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973, 113–126, here 124; in the original: »En ceci, que le mot est ressenti comme mot et non comme simple substitut de l'objet nommé ni comme l'explosion d'émotion.«

for its use – the more the material is appropriate – the more it nears nothingness. And eventually, all objects become immaterial, a volatile force in the swift circuit of exchange, the evaporated support of action which is itself pure becoming.«[20]

The artwork makes appear what disappears in the ordinary object. The material that gives form and color to the canvas would remain hidden if it was not the material of this specific work. The truth of what can be perceived is precisely in its excess of the image that re-presents it. This does not mean that its material character is sufficient to define an artwork but that what it expresses is already affirmed in it. In other words, what finds form and shape in visual art, finds them in the elementary darkness of the material used which simultaneously shows and hides like the play of light and shadow. The aesthetic object gives the appearance of being to the raw material, and the revelation of the figure in the material is always in some way contained in the darkness of the material that is used. Thus, Tillich is right when he affirms that the expressivity of a work does not refer to the subject matter or the formal aspects of representation. But that does not mean that one has to stipulate an unconditioned *Gehalt* that underlies the work as an external, ultimate referent of meaning. The work has no need of any reality beyond itself in order to express itself;[21] it only needs an amount of workable material in which it hides what it wants to express.

The advantage of this perspective is twofold: first, it avoids an ontology of art that is too burdensome because grounded in the power of the work to reveal something else besides itself; second, it anchors the production and reception of art in the sensory dimension.

But what about the religious dimension of art? The guarantees that Tillich's proposal offers disappear together with the idea of *Gehalt*, but we do not see this as a reason to complain. In postmodernity, art is the exile of truth – and thus it is even »worth more than truth«, as Friedrich Nietzsche writes.[22] Its value, whether purely aesthetic or open towards the spiritu-

20 Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature, translated, with an introduction, by Ann Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, 223.

21 One might also ask whether a work needs an audience in order to express itself.

22 Friedrich Nietzsche, Nachgelassene Fragmente Mai-Juni 1888, para. 4, Nietzsche Source: Critical Digital Edition, http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1888,17[3] [accessed 22 February 2025]; in the original: »mehr werth [sic] […] als die Wahrheit«.

al, is characterized by a *chiaroscuro*, a play of light and shadow because of which art is what escapes from the movement of the true and the process of meaning making at the same time as it seems to offer a contribution to it. The ›appearing‹ and ›signifying‹ of the work will never overcome its silence, and thus what Nietzsche writes about the tragedy is true also for the visual arts: »The brightest clarity of the image was not enough for us: because it seemed both to reveal and to veil Something; and while its allegorical revelation seemed to demand the tearing of the veil, the unveiling of the mysterious background, it was precisely that all-visibility that held the eye spellbound and prevented it from penetrating deeper.«[23]

Thus one should not expect an artwork to flaunt its religious significance – which art never has done in any case, not even when it claims to be ›sacred‹ or when people kneel in front of it. Byzantine icons are a good case in point. Marie-José Mondzain talks about the ›economy of the icon‹ not as a process of representation but on the contrary as the withdrawal of the figure and an emptiness of form that is analogous to the exile of the Son. According to Patriarch Nikephoros's refutations of the iconoclasts in the second *Antirrheticus* of the *Apologeticus Major*, the representation of the icon is legitimated by the kenosis of the incarnation. In the eyes of the faithful, the icon of Christ is empty of his real presence (unlike the consubstantiality of the eucharist), but it is full of his absence which is inscribed in visible traces. Thus Mondzain writes, the icon »does not refer to a higher reality, one that is more authentic; that would be the reality of an exterior model, invisible and distant. The distance is rather inside the icon itself«.[24] The light that emerges from the

23 Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Geburt der Tragödie, para. 24, Nietzsche Source: Critical Digital Edition, http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/GT-24 [accessed 24 February 2025]; in the original: »Die hellste Deutlichkeit des Bildes genügte uns nicht: denn dieses schien eben sowohl Etwas zu offenbaren als zu verhüllen; und während es mit seiner gleichnissartigen [sic] Offenbarung zum Zerreissen des Schleiers, zur Enthüllung des geheimnisvollen Hintergrundes aufzufordern schien, hielt wiederum gerade jene Allsichtbarkeit das Auge gebannt und wehrte ihm, tiefer zu dringen.«

24 Marie-José Mondzain, Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary, translated by Rico Franses, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 107. A little earlier, Mondzain writes: »The figure of Christ in the icon no more *resembles* the real Christ than did the lamb; on the contrary, it is more abstract. Losing all of its metaphoric and narrative character, its formal codification means that it participates not in the rhetoric of distances separating sign and signified (Old Testament writings), but in the new economy concerning the relationship of contemplator and contemplated who

icon, the richness of its colors and the use of brilliant materials must not be understood on a naively mimetic level. Instead, they serve as a reflective surface on which the gaze can never rest or find its object, and thus it can never »penetrat[e] deeper«, as Nietzsche said in the above quote. If the image has triumphed in the Christian context, it has done so as the image of a presence/absence that can never affirm its own status as representation without at the same time affirming the emptiness of the figure.

Since the Christian tradition has always been open to this ambivalent character of the image, it should have been well prepared for the arrival of abstract art. That this was not the case is less due to a real separation between Christianity and abstract art than because of contingent ideological rigidities that hindered the opening towards modern art in Christianity. While the spiritual dimension of abstract art was, at least for the first half of the 20th century, not acknowledged by theologians, it was instead affirmed by numerous artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and also Yves Klein, of whom more below. In spite of the differences between their respective artistic developments and formal decisions, the ›abstraction‹ they achieve veils the meaning of the work and thus protects it from banalizing associations or readings, raising the question of meaning in a new way. The effect produced by these painters does not eliminate distance – like the ›sacred‹ art of the past might have done – but instead acknowledges it and makes it »the motif of vision, in the double sense of motif: a motivation and a figurative theme«, as Jean-Luc Marion said.[25]

continually exchange gazes across the iconic space« (252, note 48, original emphasis). Mondzain's interpretation is echoed by Jean-Luc Marion who situates the problem of the icon in phenomenological thought. The icon opposes itself to the idolatric dimension of onto-theology by establishing a distance. It »constitutes a sort of negative theophany: the figure remains authentically insurpassable (norm, self-reference) only in that it opens in its depths upon an invisibility whose distance it does not abolish but reveals.« Jean-Luc Marion, The Idol, in: Jean-Luc Marion, The Idol and Distance: Five Studies [1977], translated and with an introduction by Thomas A. Carlson, New York: Fordham University Press, 2001, 1–9, here 9.

25 Marion, The Idol, 8.

4. ›Immediation‹ and ›Defiguration‹: Art without Codes

However, the distance required by abstraction does not imply the complete absence of representation, not only because abstract art always offers some kind of support for the imagination but also because of the programmatic continued presence and use of symbolic elements. In the careful codification that Kandinsky proposes, for example, although the forms and colors do not reproduce any ›thing‹ in the world, they still represent feelings and emotions and thus contribute to the formulation of a rich grammar of abstract art that creates access to the invisible and thus, at the same time, towards the interior and spiritual, according to Kandinsky.[26]

At a first glance, abstract art is thus non-objective art that nevertheless continues to draw on codes of representation: the line indicates the expansion of power or energy, the point represents absolute conciseness and restraint, and the variety of colors offers nuanced references to the sphere of emotions. Furthermore, this scheme of representation appears to attribute sole power to the artist who freely invents for themselves a syntax according to their own creative imagination through which they communicate with the recipient, presupposing, however, a model of one-way communication in which whatever the artist encodes in the work will be decoded according to their intention by the recipient.[27] Yet, the problem of a symbolic syntax is not exclusive to abstract art. In the tradition of the icon, the colors do not resemble any object that one could imagine in the world, either, but instead indicate the invisible to which one has to give space in the visible without reproducing it. The colors point towards the divine (red), transfiguration (yellow), humanity (blue), for example, but their symbolic meaning, drawn from the liturgical tradition, expresses itself purely on the level of perception.

This understanding of color as symbolic of the spiritual must have been familiar to Kandinsky given his familiarity with the Russian Orthodox tra-

26 Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art [1911], translated by Michael T.H. Sadler, Auckland: The Floating Press, 2008. For a more detailed discussion of Kandinsky and Henry's reading of him, see Chapter 4 in this volume.

27 On the possible gap between encoding and decoding and the resulting multiple reading positions, see Stuart Hall, Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse, in: Stuart Hall, Essential Essays, Band 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies, edited by David Morley, Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, 257–276.

dition. Yet, not content with what the tradition offers, he affirms that the meaning of form and colors is universal. For him, forms and colors are not tied to a given affective tonality in an extrinsic way that varies according to individuals and context, but instead they are identical with their affective meaning.[28] Color is not where it appears, namely on the surface of things, but where it can be sensed and perceived in its affective significance in the interior or spiritual dimension. Because it is not the objects that are colored, color does not belong to the phenomenological appearing of the world but is itself interiority. For Kandinsky, the way in which one attempts to express in words the affective tonality of every single color appears inevitably vague and relative, but this uncertainty is simply due to the limits of conceptual formulations and opens up the opportunity for different modes of expression in art.[29] The connection between color and affect precedes any cultural construction, or rather it is within, not prior to the cultural.

To think about abstract art in terms of representation (or its lack thereof) does not allow us to fully understand its novelty. Michel Henry writes in his study of Kandinsky, which is a proposal for an aesthetic theory along the lines of his phenomenology of life: »*Painting does not use language*. Abstract painting teaches us this, and this is what gives it its power of expression. If colour does not relate to the feelings of our soul through an external relation that finds its true being in them […] then it does not even need to translate through a means the abstract content of our invisible life. It coincides with our invisible life and is its pathos: its suffering, its boredom, its neglect or its joy.«[30] In this phenomenological perspective, Kandinsky's proposal is not so much a codification of colors, that is, the construction of a semantic based on fixed referents, like the theosophic theory of forms and colors. Instead, according to Henry, the novel element introduced by Kandinsky lies precisely in the elimination of the cultural and linguistic mediation that determines the symbolic or cognitive relationship between subject and object. The expressive capacity of abstract painting gains its strength from this ›immediation‹ which distances itself from representative codes in order to capture the immediate affective resonance of colors and forms. The question remains,

28 Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 79–89.

29 Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 90.

30 Michel Henry, Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky, translated by Scott Davidson, London: Continuum, 2009, 72 (original emphasis).

however, in how far this apparently immediate effect is also mediated and shaped by historical and cultural contexts that associate a particular affective tonality with particular colors or forms.[31]

As Mark C. Taylor underlines, the development of abstract art functions as a kind of purification ritual[32] so that works of abstract art are the result of a ›taking away‹ rather than an ›adding‹. The spiritual dimension can be approached only through subtraction, by removing all the mediated forms of expression until the viewers see in front of themselves only the pure, plastic presence of the work, sometimes even without a title, which offers itself to them without the support of denotations or connotations defined by the artist's or their own context or by conventions of representation. Thus the recipient is protected from an interpretation informed by external parameters that is not their own feeling of the presence of the work in its lines, colors, rhythm, format, and materials. As Jean-François Lyotard writes about a work by Barnett Newman, »[t]he picture presents, being offers itself up in the here and now. No one, and especially not Newman, makes *me* see it in the sense of recounting or interpreting what I see. I (the viewer) am no more than an ear open to the sound which comes to it from out of the silence; the painting is that sound, an accord.«[33] In the discussion of Yves Klein below, however, it becomes clear that the way in which the »picture presents« can never be completely free from references to the context of reception and the personal and socio-cultural conditions under which reception occurs. In this sense, abstract art is more like an attempt rather than the full realization of pure presence – and, in this sense, we find yet another analogy between art and the religious, in particular religious ritual, which is also always only the incomplete attempt at encountering the presence of the transcendent in the materiality of embodied existence.

What we are interested in here, however, is not so much abstraction itself; the controversy between figurative and abstract art is by now history.

31 See for a similar critique Richard J. White, Kandinsky: Thinking about the Spiritual in Art, Religion and the Arts 23 (2019), 26–49, here 35.

32 Mark C. Taylor, Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 86.

33 Jean-François Lyotard, The Inhuman: Reflections on Time, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, 83 (original emphasis).

The important aspect that remains from this discussion is the attention to artistic production as being able to incarnate in the visible the depth of life experiences, of the wounds that accompany them and of the meaning that we attempt to find in them. It is on this level that the religious dimension of art still has to be determined. Taylor attempts a somewhat unitarian reading, departing from his notion of ›a/theology‹. He describes with this term the postmodern encounter between classical theology and modern atheism in which it is possible to reunite the polarities that structure traditional religious thought. Taylor uses the concept of ›disfiguration‹ in order to understand the relationship between religion and visual arts. This complex term combines the significance of the loss and rejection of the figure (ornament, symbol, schema, human form) with what it means to renounce the urge to decipher, resolve, comprehend. The act of disfiguration means to signify through the removal of the figure, or rather of that which is already codified in the figure. This removal allows the perception of the pure aesthetic qualities of the object: »In the process of disfiguring, revelation and concealment as well as presence and absence are interwoven in such a way that every representation is both a re-presentation and a de-presentation.«[34] Disfiguring is then a function of figuration itself which is intimately connected to the dynamics of the sacred, manifesting the paradox of an unrealizable necessity. Disfiguring is sacralization in so far as it reveals the movement that ›takes away‹ from the artwork and paradoxically makes it the more powerful the less it is manifest, as if a secret law demanded that the work always remain hidden in what it shows, and show only what has to remain hidden, while at the same time concealing what is shown.[35]

5. Transcendence, for Just a Moment: Yves Klein's *Monochromes*

From the perspective of reception, we argue that it is necessary to remain in the presence of the work without being drawn into a vision of something beyond the work. Only then can the viewer experience the sensation of life,

34 Taylor, Disfiguring, 7.

35 See for this dialectic Blanchot, The Space of Literature, 230, here developed with reference to poetry.

self, and meaning that emerges only from the work itself. In the following, we will illustrate the possibility of such an experience through the analysis of the work of Yves Klein (1928–1962), in particular his blue *Monochromes*, first shown in Milan in 1957.[36]

5.1 Art as ›Impregnation‹

Klein's large, blue canvases are only one part of the artist's very productive although short career. It is worth noting, for example, his other monochromatic paintings in pink and gold which constitute a kind of trinity of color together with the ones in blue. Typical are also his sponge sculptures as paradigms of Klein's goal of ›impregnating‹ the viewers with meaning. In his cycle of fire paintings and the *Cosmogonies*, in which grass, rain, and air leave their traces on the colored canvas, the artist summons the four elements of nature; for the *Anthropometries*, he uses models (usually women) as ›living brushes‹ who ›paint‹ under his direction with their naked bodies covered in paint by leaving their prints on the canvas.[37] In his work, Klein is motivated by the will to transcend the material into the immaterial, the visible into the invisible, the physical into the spiritual – not in the sense of a replacement of one through the other, but in order to rediscover the unity of the two spheres in a purified materiality which he thinks to have found, for example, in the color blue.[38]

The methods Klein uses to achieve this goal are quite diverse: on the one hand, he uses female bodies to paint, underlining thus the material aspect of the work; on the other hand, he creates works that are literally invisible. In a 1958 solo exhibition in the gallery Iris Clert in Paris, he literally showed ›the void‹, entitled *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état de matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisé*. The work consisted of completely empty rooms

36 Some of these reflections on Yves Klein and the transcendence experienced in his works also appear in Natalie Fritz/Anna-Katharina Höpflinger/Stefanie Knauss/Marie-Therese Mäder/Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, Sichtbare Religion: Eine Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.

37 For a careful critique of the aspect of embodiment and the objectification of the female body in art see Anja Zimmermann, ›Sorry for Having to Make You Suffer‹: Body, Spectator, and the Gaze in the Performances of Yves Klein, Gina Pane, and Orlan, Discourse 24.3 (2002), 27–46.

38 Gilbert Perlein, Given a Monochrome…, in: Bruno Corà/Gilbert Perlein (ed.), Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial!, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, 13–16, here 16.

painted white by Klein, while the decoration of the entrance to the gallery and the opening of the show highlighted his famous blue (including the stamps of the invitations and the cocktails).

With Klein, it is difficult to distinguish between the work and the artist because he presents himself as a kind of artwork through his texts and the image he creates of himself as the romantic genius who sacrifices himself for his art. At the same time, in the exaggerated mythologization of his own person, he parodies the myth of the artistic genius, the quasi-high priest of art. Not only historically but also because of this play with the figure of the artist and his creative role, Klein situates himself right at the edge between the modern and the postmodern, the serious, utopistic, and parodistic, the satirical and the exaggerated.

Thus it is understandable that many interpreters use Klein's biography and his texts as the primary framework for understanding his work.[39] His case is a good opportunity to reflect on the possible impact of the artist's intentions on the reception of a work because he always openly discussed in the media what he tried to realize in his art. Yet, focusing on the artist's intention also involves the risk of using the artist in order to subdue the expressive freedom of the work itself and its impact. Klein's writings further confirm that what we today consider his creative intent was in many cases developed *after* he had learned about the reactions caused by his works.[40] The problem is thus twofold: not only can we not completely trust Klein's comments because, as said before, it is never quite clear whether his statements are serious or parody the seriousness of the art world, but also because, in the light of the theory of reception, it is important to acknowledge the freedom of the viewers to move beyond the artist's intention (however interpreted), or even in completely different directions, in the process of reception.

The individual interaction between the work and the recipient always creates a space for something new to emerge. Like all artists, Klein was conscious

39 Often, the analysis of Klein's works follows his biography up the point that one wonders whether the text is art criticism or biography, two rather different approaches and literary genres. See for example Thomas McEvilley, Yves Klein: Conquistador of the Void, in: Rice Museum, Yves Klein, 1928–1962: A Retrospective, Houston/New York: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982, 19–87.

40 Nan Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation: The Art of Yves Klein, in: Rice Museum, Yves Klein, 1928–1962: A Retrospective, Houston/New York: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982, 89–129, here 108.

of this and wanted to promote such an interaction, creating in and through his works the conditions for a profound, free, and thus necessarily personal and subjective experience.[41] Thus the relationship between the artist/sender and the audience/receiver is not a one-way street, with the ›message‹ passing from the former through the work as its medium to the latter, as in the model of communication presumed by those who insist on the primacy of the artist's intention in the analysis. Instead, the work is at the center of a complex network of mutual interactions between artist, work, and viewer (situated in their respective contexts) that are mostly free and unpredictable, and possibly even contradictory. These interrelationships are important to consider in our reflections on how the artwork can realize presence in the encounter with the viewer. On the background of our previous theoretical discussions, and drawing in particular on Klein's *Monochromes*, we will explore the ways in which a work can enable the experience of the pure presence of itself and of its viewers' existence once it is liberated from its biographical connections and social context – if that is completely possible at all.

5.2 Pictorial Sensibility and Transcendence

The *Monochromes* represent an extreme case of abstraction, as they reject any reference to an external meaning through their absolute reduction to pure monochromatic color and surface without even a line or a different color that could suggest relationship or hierarchy, and without any symbolic reference that could distract the viewer from the purely sensory reception that the work requires. Thus, the viewers have the total freedom to sense and experience without any obligation to decipher, ›read‹, or interpret what they see.[42] In the *Monochromes*, the color blue (patented by the artist under the name *International Klein Blue*, IKB) covers the whole canvas including the margins (fig. 1). Without a frame and with smooth angles, positioned so that the canvas is slightly lifted away from the wall, the rectangular surface of the painting appears to be without boundary and to open beyond itself so that the color seems to flow from the canvas, covering the distance between work and audience and filling the space normally reserved to the viewer.[43]

41 Sidra Stich, Yves Klein, Stuttgart: Cantz, 1994, 67.

42 Stich, Yves Klein, 67.

43 Perlein, Given a Monochrome…, 14.

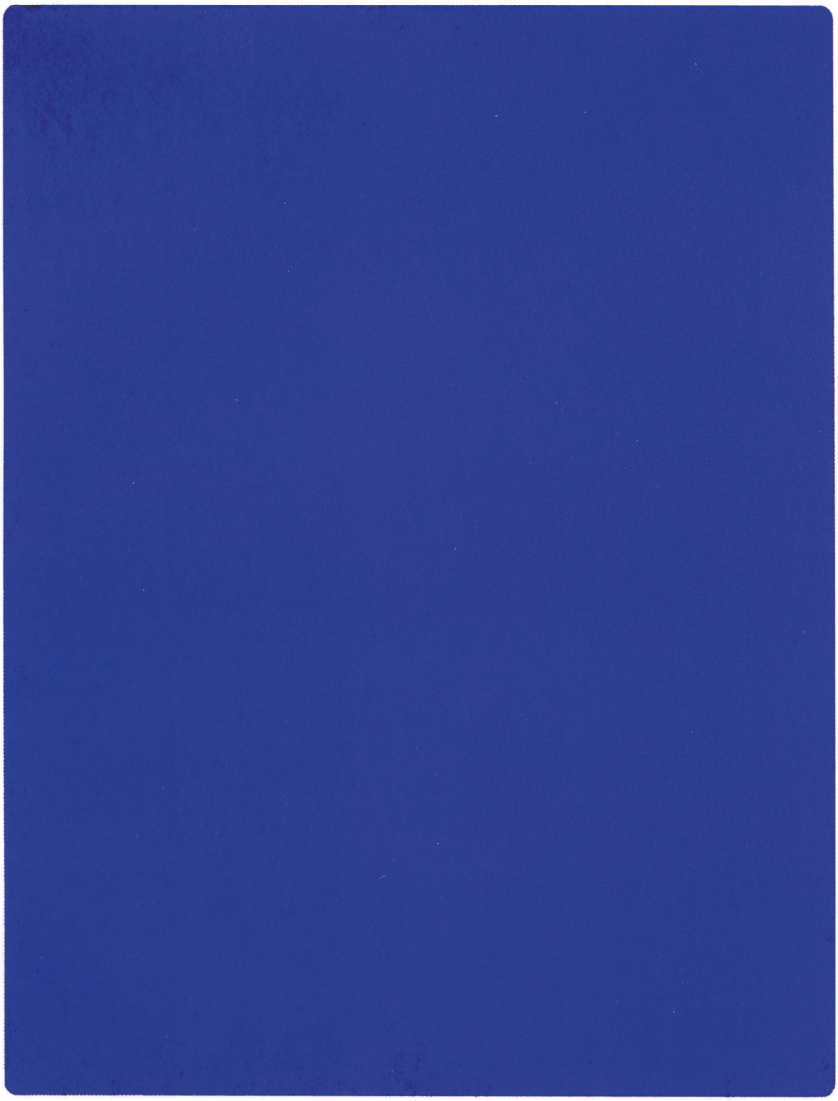

Fig. 1: Yves Klein, *Monochrome bleu* (IKB 191) (1962), pigment and raisin on canvas, 65.6 x 49 cm.[44]

44 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:IKB_191.jpg [accessed 22 February 2026].

The primary experience in the reception of a *Monochrome* is thus that of the color ultramarine with its particular depth, warmth, and richness, which at the same time seems to open a space reaching into the depth of the painting and a vastness that transcends the space of the painting outward, toward the viewer and beyond. In the moment of reception, the viewer becomes a part of these spaces that reach ›into‹ the painting and ›beyond‹ it in a moment of truth[45] – and nothing else – in the experience of the absolute presence of the work.[46]

As we said before, ›Yves le monochrome‹, as Klein liked to call himself, wanted to overcome the visible through pure color and to show the invisible in the deep blue, to achieve the immaterial, the infinite, through the purity of the material. In this sense the blue of the *Monochromes* represents a void like the one shown in the Iris Clert Gallery: an emptiness that, paradoxically, is not empty, a void that is filled and has something to offer because in its emptiness one can find a something of sense and experience.[47] The complete absence of structure and referentiality lends itself to the evocation of shere presence in the moment of reception: the presence of the work, of experience, and of one's own existence in the moment of perception.

Without referring to another reality, a *Monochrome bleu* is simply what it is:[48] the color blue that offers itself to reception, to the pure experience of

45 As Klein himself affirms, he did not want to achieve anything else with his works; see Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation, 102.

46 As we said above, a theory of reception that acknowledges the freedom of reception also recognizes that the experiences in front of an artwork may vary. Nevertheless, it is an experience in front of a given, particular artwork, in response to particular elements within the artwork and its material presence. What we describe here are dimensions of an experience we made and found confirmed in the experiences of others, such as published reviews and interpretations, but we do not claim that all viewers will feel the same.

47 Thomas McEvilley compares this sense of the void in Klein's works with the Buddhist concept of the void, a non-negative emptiness that is at the same time fullness; see Thomas McEvilley, Yves Klein and the Double-edged Sublime, in: Tracey R. Bashkoff (ed.), On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell, Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2001, 61–83, here 81.

48 The critical literature speaks even of a ›real presence‹ of color which represents only what it is. This use of theological terminology is certainly effective but also seems to be an example of a reference to a religious-theological context external of the image that does not allow the artwork its autonomy. See for example Jürgen Stöhr, Yves Klein und die ästhetische Erfahrung: Beiträge zu einer Theorie ästhetischer Erfahrung mit Rücksicht auf das Kunstschaffen Yves Kleins, Essen: Verlag Die blaue Eule, 1993, 170.

the work. The invisible character of color emerges here with the same affective power on the interiority of the viewer as described by Kandinsky. But it is also obvious that even pure color is not totally autonomous and free of cultural associations and thus external meaning. Most fundamentally, even though Klein's blue is not the color *of* something or represents something, it cannot defy the preconditions of visual reception: without being able to see and without knowing what color is, Klein's painting would remain not just without connotative meaning but also without its sensory effect. And while the *International Klein Blue* is a pure and a-referential color, it cannot separate itself from the everyday context of the viewer or the traditions of art history, nor from the fact that its inventor patented it as ›his‹ color. Klein's blue is necessarily integrated into a system of references and meanings, even if in a more limited and indetermined way than a figurative motif, a line, or one of Kandinsky's shapes.

And these relationships of meaning and association are numerous. As far as the sphere of nature is concerned, Klein's blue evokes the sky and sea, the spaces that are most closely associated with the infinite in Western culture. In the context of art history, Klein himself compares his blue to the blue of Giotto's frescoes, inserting himself into a historical context of artistic creation and meaning by referencing the symbolism of the color blue which for Giotto signified infinity, knowledge, spirituality, etc.[49] The web of significance of these cultural connotations of blue (in addition to whatever personal associations someone might have with the color) shows that the reception of a *Monochrome bleu* is not an encounter that occurs in complete isolation but refers to and participates in everyday experiences, the story of the viewers, perhaps their knowledge of art history or color symbolism in Western culture, and so on. A pure sensing of the work which does not even minimally take into account the context in which it is encountered is thus impossible; but what is possible, and what Klein does in the *Monochrome*, is to delimit and delay as much as possible the impact of this context and focus attention on the presence of the artwork itself.

The process of reception occurring – or potentially occurring – when standing in front of a *Monochrome* is characterized by an ambiguity due to a slight temporal offset and the twofold mode of experience made in it. In

49 Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation, 101.

a first, short moment, standing in front of the *Monochrome*, I experience a pure ›sensing of the blue‹ because of the complete lack of semantic reference points: I sense the space that opens under the pressure of color and the dissolution of the boundaries between the painting and the reality in front of it that leads me to the threshold of another reality. This sensation is in fact a synesthetic experience. I perceive the blue not only through my eyes in its tonality as a deep, dark ultramarine, but there is also a spatial perception as if the color extends from the painting, and in addition, it stimulates the sense of touch: the colored canvas seems to brush against me and transmit the tactile impression of a velvety surface.[50] Klein also wanted to integrate hearing into the experience of the *Monochromes*, creating thus already in 1947–1948 the project of a ›monotone‹ symphony (composed of one note followed by silence) as the auditive equivalent of the monochrome in painting.[51] This suggests that the experience of transcendence in the encounter with an artwork is possible only as a sensibility that transcends the limiting separation between the individual senses and unites the whole human being in this experience of reception. But this moment in which one captures the infinity of color and feels oneself in a multi-sensorial, bodily contact with it, is only a brief impression, volatile like infinity itself. Yet instead of constituting a deficit of the aesthetic experience of the transcendent, this transitory aspect of the experience appears as an essential element of what one experiences: any more permanent, and it would no longer be an experience of the unfathomable.

In the next moment, I move from pure sensation and feeling (of the image, and of myself sensing and feeling the image) to reflection, with the natural, and naturally suspicious, question: what exactly am I doing here? ›What‹ do I see and feel given that there is ›nothing‹ to see in »these rectangular chunks of color«?[52] And what was it I felt a moment ago when I was immersed in the open space of blue in and beyond the image? Why should

50 Kandinsky notes that some colors, such as dark ultramarine – as which one might describe Klein's blue – invite touch »so that one feels inclined to stroke them« (Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 60).

51 Biography (Michèle Brun and Archives Yves Klein), in: Bruno Corà/Gilbert Perlein (ed.), Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial!, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, 211–236, here 212.

52 Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation, 104.

this blue canvas that has nothing distinctive apart from its particular color be an original, singular artwork, and why does it evoke these sensations in me?

This series of questions might also expand beyond my individual reception: why were people prepared to pay different prices for apparently identical paintings (even though each was painted individually, manually, and thus shows slight differences) during the first show of the *Monochromes* in Milan? What distinguishes this particular work from a mass-produced object? What is its ›aura‹ that causes people to stop in front of it?[53] These are questions that are fundamental to any discourse about art, and they emerge precisely in the experience of the process of reception of a *Monochrome*. In the void inhabited only by color and its affective tonality, a movement begins that leads from pure, synesthetic feeling to the reflection about the act of reception and back again, uniting the sensory, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions in the human being in the act of aesthetic (in all senses of the word) reception.[54]

For his part, Yves le monochrome would not have had any doubts about how to respond to the questions raised here. He would probably have explained that in the process of production, a process which emerges from the artist's sensations and experiences, he impregnated his works with what he called »pictorial sensibility«.[55] In the process of reception this sensibility is passed on from the work to the viewers and impregnates them in turn. Thus it is this pictorial sensibility that differentiates one canvas from the other, attributes originality to an artwork, and gives it the power to attract an audience to look at it, because it has something to give, because it offers itself as an occasion of experience.

Perhaps the blue of the *Monochromes* is an example of what Tillich could not find in the books of theologians, nor in any other book, and of which only art allowed him to intuit a trace. Given that the *Monochromes* reject any symbolic-discursive interpretation and evoke only a pure feeling in the

53 These questions have been raised by several critics of Klein, see for example Stich, Yves Klein, 87; Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation, 107–111. For the concept of the aura see Chapter 2 in this volume.

54 Stich, Yves Klein, 68.

55 Yves Klein, The Monochrome Adventure, in: Bruno Corà/Gilbert Perlein (ed.), Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial!, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, 75–84, here 78. In his ›invisible‹ works, Klein tried to realize this sensibility in complete freedom from any form and to make it present where it exists most purely, in the void, in the absence; Klein, The Monochrome Adventure, 78–79.

first moment of their reception (whereas the meta-reflection occurs in a second step, already at the edge of the aesthetic experience and without adding anything to the primary sensory experience with its references to external discourses), one can understand that the blue paintings allow one to see and experience what books are not able to communicate, simply because as texts, they are always already integrated into an alphabetical, linguistic, and conceptual system that poses limits to what they can say. The excess, the expressive surplus of visual arts in which Tillich rediscovers the existential questions and anxieties of his time and which refuses the banalization of the religious and spiritual that he diagnoses in industrialized societies, is thus given in the presence of the work as it offers itself to the sensory experience of its audience, before and independently from its codification in signifiers.

Tillich identifies the ultimate or spiritual dimension of art as *Gehalt*, and the more profound it is, the more the *Gehalt* disappears from the work itself, whereas the experience of the *Monochromes* shows that it is necessary to stay in the presence of the work, to feel oneself feeling its presence in order to enter into the dynamic of transcendence. Along the same lines, the objects of so-called religious art detract from the pure aesthetic value of the presence of the work in the moment of reception because their legitimation as sacred art does not lie in themselves but in their reference to conventions and doctrines external to the image itself.

Critics and theorists continue to attempt to identify the connection between the aesthetic and religious in an external framework of references, be it in relation to the artist's intention or the subject matter and symbolic significance of the work,[56] and they do that with a certain success, even in the context of a work without any external reference points like the *Monochromes*. Numerous interpreters have attempted to include Klein's art in the traditional coordinates of sacred art by making reference to his Catholic socialization, his personal spiritual quest which led him to engage with various esoteric traditions, his use of Christian concepts such as incarnation, trinity, or transubstantiation. In particular, the theory of the icon has been used to explain the play between the visible and invisible in his works. Denys Riout, for example, compares the pictorial sensibility in the visibility

56 Thus for example Charlene Spretnak who identifies the spiritual »underground river« in contemporary art through the artist's religious or spiritual intentions; see Spretnak, The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art, 1–2.

of the work to the invisible divine that makes itself seen in the icon.[57] Thus interpreters attribute to Klein a search for the sacred that he ›captures‹ in the invisible void of his visible canvases and that then makes itself available for reception.[58] Such an interpretation has its use and legitimacy in so far as it provides us with information about the artist and the ways in which he has experienced the process of artistic production. But it is open to the risk, yet again, of diminishing the freedom of reception guaranteed by the self-referentiality of pure color and introducing a system of explicatory references to realities outside of the image.

Yet it is possible to find a relationship between Tillich's *Gehalt* and Klein's pictorial sensibility, at least in so far as both attempt to identify an element within or underneath the image that cannot be identified with its visible traces but is found in the space that the artwork opens up, and captured only in the process of aesthetic reception. Precisely because of this necessary sensory dimension, this element is connected for both Klein and Tillich with life, existence itself. Klein in particular affirms that he wants to paint »the pictorial moment which is born of an illumination by impregnation in life itself«.[59] Yet for Klein, in spite of the spiritual motivations of his artistic creativity, the pictorial sensibility is not an expression of a sacredness that would be in any way objectifiable and separable from the artwork, as it is the *Gehalt* for Tillich. The pictorial sensibility remains interior to the image, like an energy impressed in the elementary obscurity of matter and color that reveals itself only in the encounter between work and viewers who, in sensing the work, allow themselves to be impregnated with life in their own sensoriality.

6. Conclusion

As we said above, it is impossible to remove *all* external reference points from the process of reception of an artwork, but this is not even necessary, given that it would mean disregarding the contextuality and situatedness of human

57 Denys Riout, Yves Klein: Manifester l'immatériel, Paris: Gallimard, 2004, 34–35.

58 Alain Buisine, Blue, Gold, Pink: The Colors of the Icon, in: Bruno Corà/Gilbert Perlein (ed.), Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial!, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, 21–34, here 30.

59 Klein, The Monochrome Adventure, 76.

embodied existence in general and of every single experience we make in particular. But the reduction to pure color and the lack of symbols or geometrical forms in Klein's *Monochromes* delimits these external references and makes it possible that the perception focuses on the singular presence of the work and the individual who encounters it. The meaning that emerges from this encounter is more existential than what Tillich identified as *Gehalt*: it is the experience of my own existence as a perceiving, bodily being, equipped with senses and a mind that can reflect upon what I perceive. It is the experience of being myself as a part of the world, of the space I inhabit. It can also, just for a moment, be the experience of infinity and immateriality, the consciousness of having perceived something that is not objectively given, that is absent and yet present in the (im)materiality of pure color.

Through the elimination of any objective representation, the painting allows me to see what has never been seen before by offering itself to the synesthetic intensification of sensory perception that involves the viewer's whole being and does not allow them to eliminate too quickly the *pathos* of aesthetic affects in order to focus on discursive meaning and interpretation. Between the two moments of reception, pure sensation and reflection, there remains a gap, a promise of connection when in the complete aesthetic experience senses and sense connect, liberated from their traditional separation.

It becomes clear that abstraction in painting cannot be a point of arrival but only of departure, a moment of tension that can never be resolved, a quasi-liturgical ritualization of the desire that art may respond to our need to incarnate the depth of our experiences, hopes, and anxieties in the sensory and visible. Like any ritual action, abstraction is a means and not the end. It aims at increasing and restoring our capacity to see, in an »overall movement of our being«.[60] On the one hand, this makes us again attentive to the aesthetic quality of all artistic productions that can never be reduced to the representative dimension. And on the other hand, even more importantly, it provides a moment of suspension in which the invisible and the transcendent brush against our capacities to perceive and sense. Nothing that we see in the work can reproduce or describe this experience but, in the perception of the work, a space has opened up between ourselves and the work in which the infinite can circulate and communicate. This is the

60 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 124.

space when the aesthetic sensibility has returned to its depth and opened up for the unconditioned.

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Chapter 4
Seeing the Invisible, Feeling the Visible
Michel Henry on Aesthetics and Abstraction

Davide Zordan

1. Introduction

The Romantic conviction that art can save religious experience from its weakness and dogmatic entanglements represented, despite some ambiguities, a real chance for theological thinking. Yet it is not art itself but its effects, or better, its capacity to strengthen our will to life (art as »the great stimulant to life«, in Friedrich Nietzsche's words[1]) that attracted Romantic minds and persuaded them to focus on the problem of sensibility, or aesthetics. And thus, in Romantic Idealism, aesthetics was identified as a fundamental paradigm of reflection not only with regard to art but also as a valuable model for the interpretation of human experience as a whole, including the religious sphere.

What has remained of this Romantic enterprise? Not very much that might be immediately useful for theological purposes. The aesthetic paradigm maintains its significance for religious analysis, but it has to be restated in more secular terms and in a more nuanced way today. Now, phenomenology, and French phenomenology in particular, has replaced Romantic-idealistic

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols [1888], translated by Richard Polt, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997, § 24, 65.

aesthetics with important reflections on the subject of religious experience, sometimes even going so far as to be accused of a sort of »theological turn«.[2]

One of those phenomenologists, and maybe the one most blamed for his theological leanings, is Michel Henry. In this chapter I will discuss his thoughts about art as a »culture of feeling«[3] and about aesthetics as a philosophical perspective on the transcendental conditions of human experience. In his critical essay on Wassily Kandinsky, published in 1988,[4] Henry outlines an aesthetic theory that emerges from his phenomenology of life. He is persuaded to find, in Kandinsky's writings more than in his art, a confirmation of the validity of his own philosophical thought. Thus in the first section, I will briefly recall some of the characteristic elements of Henry's thinking before discussing in detail his aesthetic reflections inspired by Kandinsky, followed by a critical evaluation. In my conclusion, I suggest a possible theological use of Henry's phenomenological approach as an adequate argument for the importance of the senses and of sensibility for religious experience.

2. A Radical Phenomenology, or: The Quest for Appearance as Such

According to Henry, a foundational discourse in philosophy must put the pathic[5] dimension of human sensibility at the center of its phenomenological investigations. Such an investigation does not study the wide range of empirically observable feelings and emotions but exclusively the conditions that make these human feelings and emotions capable of qualifying every experience of our lives in a specific way. In Henry's view, the essence or truth

2 Dominique Janicaud, Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française, Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 1992.

3 Michel Henry, Barbarism, translated by Scott Davidson, London: Continuum, 2012, 117.

4 Michel Henry, Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky, translated by Scott Davidson, London: Continuum, 2009.

5 According to Martin Heidegger, the ›pathic‹ represents a fundamental dimension of the ›being-in-the-world‹ (*Dasein*), i.e. the fact that human beings feel themselves always in and through a specific emotional tone (*Stimmung*). Henry even radicalizes this view so that the pathic dimension indicates the scope of human emotions not as added to our self and as empirically observable but as a pre-condition of human experience itself.

of every manifestation – in other words, what makes possible the giving of phenomena to us – is exactly that which cannot be given as a phenomenon in the exterior space and in the dynamic of intentionality: instead, it is the immanent feeling of a radical interiority. What does this mean practically for human experience? After all, we have a tendency to imagine the human subject as given in itself, independently from its pathic dimension. In a very general way, we envision all of what a subject ›feels‹ as ›something‹ which can manifest itself in causing the subject to be exalted or depressed, as a sort of addition to the ›center‹ of the individual, at most as an ephemeral coloration of an idea of the subject which itself is thought to be affectively neutral or static.[6] Thus we imagine a representation of the human being that seems altogether consistent with the idea of the autonomy of the subject, of its equidistance from all the affective possibilities inherent in its being sentient.

Now, in Henry's thought, this is not only a partial representation but an illusory and essentially insincere one. This representation is based upon a confusion between *sensibility* (the power to feel something and being affected by it)[7] and *affectivity* (the ontological ground of every feeling that is expressed, which lies in auto-affection)[8]. The affective tones do not refer at all to the sphere of our sensibility, do not ›occur‹ in a subject like entities coming from elsewhere and passing through the subject modifying it, but they take place as the original manifestation of the subject itself. The subject exists precisely and primarily inasmuch as it is capable of auto-affection. Every feeling is precisely and primarily a feeling-oneself. The reflexive consciousness we have of our feelings and affects does not account for what they are originally in us, and for the fact that they make us what we are. Thus Henry affirms that a feeling »never is and cannot be sensed« and »perceived«,[9] and he explains as follows:

6 See in this sense Martin Heidegger, Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte Probleme der Logik, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 45, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1984, 160–161.

7 Michel Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, translated by Girard Etzkorn, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973, 463.

8 Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, 461–462.

9 Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, 463.

> This is why a proposition such as »I feel in me a great love« or again »a profound boredom« is equivocation at its highest degree. For there is not, there never is, as far as love or boredom is concerned, something like a power of feeling different from them which would be »commissioned« to receive them, namely, to feel them as an opposed or foreign content. Rather, it is love or boredom, *it is the feeling itself which receives itself and experiences itself in such a way that this capacity for receiving itself, for experiencing itself, of being affected by self, constitutes what is affective in it, this is what makes a feeling.*[10]

Affectivity is not sensible in itself, but it is the ground of sensibility. It is the essence of selfhood,[11] so that the deep structure of the immanent subject can be understood and described as the passivity of the human being toward itself, as the *se sentir soi-même*, the original ontological passivity.

The object of phenomenological analysis is, for Henry, this immanent, invisible, and unreflected ground which makes possible every feeling and every experience. I am walking, looking, laughing, or crying, but all these acts are projections of myself into the exteriority of the world. Consciousness itself performs these acts as part of mundane exteriority. Before knowing myself as walking, looking, laughing, or crying, before each modality of intentional consciousness, *I am* this walking, looking, laughing, or crying itself. In other words, there is a feeling which is immanent to my walking, looking, etc. Henry defines this affective and non-intentional content, this original auto-manifestation, as the matter of consciousness (»matière de la conscience«[12]) or the impressionality of the impression.[13] In this absence of mediation, and only here, life shows itself, and every subjectivity finds a permanent ground. In following this intuition, Henry propounds a reversal of the phenomenological project, whose object is no longer intentional acts and contents but the original pathos, the immanence of what is not projected outside the self in the form of impressions, perceptions, knowing. The space of manifestation to which attention should be paid is not that of

10 Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, 464 (original emphasis).

11 Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, 465.

12 Michel Henry, Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair, Paris: Seuil, 2000, 71.

13 Michel Henry, Phénoménologie matérielle, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990, 21.

the relation between subject and object, between the self and the world, but a purely interior and invisible space. In this perspective, which Henry considers an overcoming of Husserl and a return to Decartes' true but misunderstood intuition,[14] it is not thought that gives access to life, as the philosophical tradition has thought, but life that allows thought to access itself, to show itself as a modality of life.

This can of course also be applied to the religious act of believing. Such an act supposes, as said earlier, that *I am* this believing; it assumes an intimate ›feeling to believe‹ that allows the believing self to experience itself. Following Henry, one could say that even faith, understood as a disposition and a decision to believe, is a modality of life, and thus there is no other faith than the one given to the subject in the auto-donation of Life. This means that I can deceive myself about the contents of my faith, I can give credit to something that is not worthy of it, but, on the other hand, nothing can damage the truth, that is, the immanence and pathos of my ›feeling to believe‹, of this unmediated upsurge that makes me adhere to what I feel is more intimate to me than myself. Of course, such a statement does not offer arguments for an apologetic of a historical faith and its claim to truth. And yet it represents an interesting point for the study of religion and theology: these disciplines could gain maximum benefit from an analysis of what precedes the specific acts of believing consciousness and their rootedness in our originary affectivity.

Moreover, Henry's theoretical framework, with its constant reference to the original passivity/affectivity in which every human experience is rooted, allows us to apprehend the proximity of religion and aesthetics, impeding at the same time any attempt to colonize the former or the latter. Both of them, in fact, belong to the original affectivity more than they belong to themselves. Religious and aesthetic experiences function as catalysts of the Life that lies in ourselves and in which we are given to ourselves. There is a certain something in these experiences that resists the centrifugal polarity typical of what is humanly experienced, and by reason of which whatever we feel or make, is always felt or made in mundane exteriority, is always projected outside of ourselves. Where does this unique ability for resistance come

14 The object of such an intuition, according to Henry, is not the *cogito*, but the *videor*; see on this Jean-Luc Marion, Générosité et phénoménologie: Remarques sur l'interprétation du cogito cartésien par Michel Henry, Les Études philosophiques 58.1 (1988), 51–72.

from that characterizes religious and aesthetic experience? For an answer to this question, I turn to Kandinsky's theory of abstract painting, which Henry recovers, charging it with an ontological meaning.

3. The Colors of the Invisible

In his theoretical writings, Kandinsky analyzes the geometrical elements which make up every painting from the point of view of their inner effect on the observer and theorizes a relation between sensation and abstraction.[15] He claims that every phenomenon can be experienced in two ways: internally and externally. Henry attributes great importance to this insight, as it points out two possible phenomenological trajectories, an intentional and a non-intentional (or material, as Henry says) one. These divergent trajectories can be well observed in the attitudes of Henry and Maurice Merleau-Ponty towards painting. According to Merleau-Ponty, an artist intent on painting is not allowed to give voice to Cartesian doubts: they »cannot grant that our openness to the world is illusory or indirect, that what we see is not the world itself«;[16] they know in fact that »[t]he eye accomplishes the prodigious work of opening the soul to what is not soul – the joyous realm of things«.[17]

Henry understands painting in exactly the opposite way. In his view, painting – art – has nothing to do with the visible world, rather it gives visibility to the interior and invisible Life. The wonder itself of vision is not so much the power to see the beauty of various objects but the revelation of subjectivity as a phenomenological ability to see. Otherwise access to the »joyous realm of things« would not be different for us than for a camera, and our emotion in front of a celebrated painting would be comparable to that of a museum's surveillance camera. To be fair, Merleau-Ponty's proposition goes beyond such a rigid either/or. He agrees with Henry that our very first access

15 Wassily Kandinsky, Point and Line to Plane: Contribution to the Analysis of the Pictorial Elements [1926], translated by Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay, New York: Dover, 1979.

16 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind, translated by Carleton Dallery, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 159–190, here 186–187.

17 Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind, 186.

to exterior reality is not an act of representation and does not imply the displacement that is involved in processes of consciousness. In Merleau-Ponty's view, the world unfolds to us in an immediate manner, regardless of the Cartesian distinction between the internal and the external, and thanks to a pre-reflexive power inscribed within our bodies and sensibilities.

For Henry, however, Merleau-Ponty's attempt limits itself to the level of our encounter with the external world while denouncing the aporetic results of any phenomenolgical project that do not push the analysis beyond intentional experiences. According to Henry, this is not enough, because the very phenomenological question does not concern »what appears […] but the act of appearing«, or the ›how‹ of the appearance of the phenomenon.[18] From the perspective of a classical phenomenologist, such a question cannot find an answer because the appearance of phenomena itself is the source of wonder and of philosophy. But not so for Henry, who cultivates the ambition to push his initial query in the direction of pure impressionality.

But what could ›explain‹ the sense of wonder? Nothing in the external world, because what is exterior cannot explain what is interior. That is, nothing in our world, except perhaps art. And how could that be if painting is nothing but rendering something visible? Does not a painting belong to the realm of the visible and therefore to the exteriority of the world? In fact it belongs to exteriority because of the material from which it is made, but only because of that. All the rest, that is, the form and the expression of the painting, ought to be recognized as interior and invisible. Thus, even in painting, the phenomenologist has to give account of the twofold mode of appearance. The finality of painting, and of artworks in general, is not representational, and thus Merleau-Ponty's account should be reversed: this »prodigious work«, when it happens, is precisely that of opening to the soul the soul itself, that of seeing something which is not the world itself.

This is the paradox of abstract painting in Kandinsky's conception, which, however, in Henry's view, gives evidence to the quality of every painting and of pictorial art as such. No real artist presents a mere representation but intends to use their art to evoke in us a vibration which is not the result of our conscious understanding of what is possibly represented in the work. The painter does not represent but compose, and their activity must be under-

18 Henry, Incarnation, 35; in the original: »ce qui apparaît […] mais l'acte d'apparaître«.

stood, according to both Kandinsky and Henry, in close analogy with the art of musical composition. To compose music, one needs to know musical forms and be able to combine them observing the rules of melody and harmony. In a similar way, Kandinsky seeks to identify and analyze the basic elements of pictorial composition (lines, graphic forms, colors): »A *composition* is nothing other than an *exact law-abiding organization* of the vital forces which, in the form of tensions, are shut up within the elements.«[19] Kandinsky is convinced that it is possible to determine precisely these laws in examining compositional elements not from an external perspective but in the attempt to capture their intimate pulse, their musical quality: »Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings.«[20] Hence, musical composition is only apparently distinguished from the pictorial because it is invisible. They are both art insofar as they speak to feeling, which, in a Kantian way, allows us to grasp the shape of things. And finally, they are both invisible with regard to that which really characterizes them.

For Henry, Kandinsky's analysis of the twofold way in which things can be experienced and the consequent duplicity of pictorial elements is coherent with his own distinction between the affective and the sensible. The red color I see on the surface of the canvas is one thing, and the impression that this red color creates in myself is another. But the perspective has to be reversed: what founds my sensibility, what allows me to admire a particular shade of color in a painting in a way which is not merely reflexive, is not the color itself as it is applied to the canvas but the matter of consciousness, that is, a pure force, an impression that Life, and Life only, is able to catch in its auto-affecting. The primacy of interiority is absolute. The terms employed by Henry to express such a reversal are arresting but they do not lack precision: »There is no red in the world. Red is a sensation, and this sensation is absolutely subjective, originally invisible. Originary colors are invisible, but they are spread on things through a process of projection.«[21]

19 Kandinsky, Point and Line to Plane, 92 (original emphasis).

20 Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art [1911], translated by Michael Sadler, New York: Dover, 1977, 25.

21 Michel Henry, Phénoménologie de la vie, vol 3: De L'Art et du politique, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004, 290; in the original: »Il n'y a pas de rouge dans le monde. Le rouge est une sensation, et cette sensation est absolument subjective, originairement

In other words, color is not originally where it is sought but rather where it is felt, thus in interiority.[22] Henry is not afraid to follow Kandinsky even when his theory about color becomes essentialist and thus problematic. The Russian painter proposes a series of enthusiastic assessments of the essence of red, yellow, blue, that is, of the affective tonalities intrinsically related to each color. But how can one not see how much the cultural is implicated in such evaluations? How is it possible to claim their absolute and unconditional validity? According to Henry, a distinction must be made: what lacks validity and appears vague or naive, »is the figurative language with which one seeks to express the affectivity of colour«[23] but not the relation between colors and affect, which is not even a relation but rather their full coincidence in the auto-affection of Life. Despite the theoretical embarrassments that can be attributed to him, Kandinsky was aware of the necessity to distinguish between the attempt to put into words the relation between colors and affects by means of »very provisional and general«[24] remarks and the indefinable subtlety of both the chromatic tonalities and the profound emotions of interior life. Such subtlety is quickly lost as soon as it becomes exteriorized, as soon as it is translated into thought and word, and abstract art can rediscover it only thanks to its rejection of codified language. Free from any discursive or representative constraint, colors and other pictorial ele-

invisible. Les couleurs originaires sont invisibles, mais elles sont étendues sur des choses par un processus de projection.«

22 A classical empiricist would interpret this statement differently and consider the fact that through our senses, we experience the ›impression‹ of colors. They would thus conclude that not the objects we look at but our experiences are colored. Henry, on the contrary, cannot be considered to be a supporter of chromatic subjectivism. In his view the sensible experience in which (colored) objects are given to us does not represent a primary given because it presupposes the auto-affection of Life where sensations are rooted. Color is a sensation, subjective and invisible.

23 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 72.

24 Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 42. Henry remarks: »The difficulty that the theory of colours runs into as long as it speaks from the perspective of ›physics‹ – a difficulty that *On the Spiritual in Art* does not altogether avoid – disappears once its approach, either consciously or unconsciously, becomes phenomenological.« Thus, in Henry's material phenomenology, Kandinsky's theory finds »its radical foundation, the same one that Descartes gave to philosophy and that protects it from the reproach of being a mere interpretation« (Seeing the Invisible, 75).

ments regain their primordial force, on account of the affective resonance they are able to produce.

I mentioned above that in Henry's view a painting belongs to the mundane visibility exclusively because of its material, not because of its form and expression. However, the results of this disjunction are inadequate in regard to the extent of the revolution caused by abstract art, and thus Henry goes even further, saying that, according to Kandinsky, even matter is an element of composition and that, at the same time, the sole principle governing the composition is a principle of interior necessity. Any support material is subjected to it. As an element of composition, material is twofold: it has an exterior appearance – for example paper, canvas, wood, or glass – and an interior aspect because it modifies the forms drawn on it and the color with which it is covered. Hence their effect on us: »From the latter point of view, it should be said that *matter is invisible*. It is a pathos. This is truly how it enters into the composition.«[25] Support material is withdrawn from visibility as far as it interacts with other pictorial elements in order to compose a product offered not to sensory perception but, through perception, to the power to feel which is one with our pathic subjectivity, with the being we are, with Life in us.

How do painters succeed in making visible the invisible? They have to use pictorial means to ›abstract‹ from any reference to the exterior world. To abstract means in this context not just to put into question the visible surface of things (as in Impressionism, then Cubism, and up to Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian) but to definitively turn one's back to the mundane and the forms of its representation, merging into the secret of radical subjectivity. This means not so much to change the object of art but rather to lose it: painting becomes »a knowledge without object«.[26] Henry understands Kandinsky's conception of abstract painting as an ontological move. If, according to Kandinsky, the proper dimension of art is the spiritual one, the French philosopher identifies this spiritual dimension with Life's immanent self-revelation. In abstract art, life is never objectified nor represented. Instead, one could say that abstract art is an expression of life, provided one understands exactly that the artwork offers an opportunity to show

25 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 92 (original emphasis).

26 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 18.

life in ourselves, to feel its auto-affection anew. Only in this sense is it correct to say that painting is the exteriorization or the materialization of an invisible content.

4. The Duplicity of Appearance and the Space of Its Recomposition

Michel Henry's contribution to philosophy contrasts with the contemporary tendency to abandon great systems and the general distrust in the capacities of reason to enrich the sense of being and the capability of language to designate such a sense. Even philosophers who continue to identify the object of their quest as ›truth‹ do not seem to be able to express this truth except by subtraction or deconstruction. Henry's thought, on the other hand, differentiates itself from this broad tendency and from a modality of expression generally inspired by circumspection and fragmentation. In his view, human beings hold within themselves, in the pathic dimension of their life, a meaning beyond all doubt upon which it is possible and necessary to build an ontology. And this is what he proposes to do in his writings.

Not surprisingly, this earned him the sympathy of several theologians, *a fortiori* after the publication of his late works which are a dialogue with the Christian tradition and in which he identifies the emblematic figure of Christ as the original Son in whom the originary coming-to-us of Life takes place.[27] This wave of theological interest seems to be motivated, at least in part, by his relief to finally find a party which, so to say, does not economize the metaphysical aspirations of reason and seems to be immune to the ›virus‹ of relativism (whatever that might be). Yet there is no doubt that Henry's thought resists any offhand use of it, requiring first of all a careful understanding of the terms of his phenomenology. I think that Henry's fundamental intuition represents an original and effective criticism of every form of objectivist thought, which directly or indirectly denies the pathic subjectivity involved in all acts of human perception and minimizes its place in the contemporary ontological debate. Even phenomenology, for Henry, is part of this objectiv-

27 For example in Michel Henry, C'est moi la vérité: Pour une philosophie du christianisme, Paris: Seuil, 1996; Michel Henry, Paroles du Christ, Paris: Seuil, 2002; Henry, Incarnation.

ism when it equates phenomenality with visibility and consequently imagines that the only mode of appearance is that of exteriority, transcendent to consciousness. In this way one risks obscuring the most important form of appearance, namely that of the self to the self, or self-affection, in Henry's terms. Self-affection means not knowledge of oneself, which is already transcendent, but the feeling of oneself, which is immanent. The appearance of self-affection, which is not detectable in a transcendent horizon, has to be identified before its self-alienation in the representative space of the world. This is precisely the purpose of material phenomenology.

But Henry's criticism of the ontological monism of Western philosophy does not mean that every form of objectivation is insignificant. When Henry states that the phenomenal appearance of things does not explain, found, nor reveal anything, his position becomes difficult to justify theoretically and rather seems dictated by polemics. The idea of radical affectivity as an absolute power of Life in my flesh, regardless of history, thought, and body, and assumed as self-evident, seems to be, in turn, the result of representation.[28]

I would argue that this is also true for the aesthetic sphere. Henry points out the limits of the conception of art as *mimesis*, albeit understood as imitation of moods and emotions, or as a symbol for interiority. His intuition, borrowed from Kandinsky, to consider abstract art not as an artistic current but rather as a key to the understanding of all figurative art, leads Henry to theorize that the pictorial elements receive their expressiveness from the fact that they are related to the originary phenomenological matter, or better, identify themselves with this matter, in the depth of invisible Life. The advantage of such a theoretical move is the retrieval of aesthetic emotion, which thus acquires an absolute dignity. But there is a price to pay if we want to follow Henry's hypothesis to the end, and this price is that such an emotion is so pure and originary to exclude in principle any connection with the cultural, historical, and symbolic context. Once again, the duplicity of appearance gives rise to a radical dichotomy.

28 After having established a dualism between immanence and transcendence, such a representation proclaims salvific the former and meaningless the latter. But proceeding strictly in this way, we have no other solution than to embrace a monistic conception of the subject and its immanent truth, in opposition to the monism or objectivism of Western philosophy that Henry criticizes.

I would therefore argue that it is possible to assume Henry's aesthetic view without sharing the peremptory dualism of its outcomes. The operation is delicate due to the very systematic character of Henry's thought but one can glimpse a possible legitimation for this move in a passage towards the end of *Seeing the Invisible*, where the author alludes to the quality of the emotion felt in front of works of Christian art. What determines, for example, the emotion felt when looking at Mathias Grünewald's *Resurrection*, one of the panels of the Issenheim Altarpiece (1512–1516)? Henry's answer is not surprising: such an emotion derives uniquely from the affective tonalities of the elements of the pictorial composition. Far from being a simple repetition of *topoi* and themes of Christian iconography, this masterpiece reworks these motifs in such a way that they become incommensurate with the representation of any exterior reality. »Objects in the real world are defined on the level of sensibility by their colours and their sensible forms«, he writes, up to the point that they do not express anything but the »auto-affirmation of life in its exaltation and in the certainty of its force.«[29] It seems clear, however, that independently of the author's will, there emerges a collaboration between the pathic-affective dimension and the representative one and that such a collaboration helps to better understand the artistic phenomenon without any need to distinguish between abstraction and figuration. Henry is forced to admit the role of imagination in the reworking of traditional iconography, and he affirms that the function of the imagination is to transfer »this so-called figurative painting [Grünewald's *Resurrection*] into the domain of the purest abstraction.«[30] But if the artist's imagination is capable to do this, I see no reason why one should not acknowledge the recipients' ability to create a synthesis within themselves between the immanent and the transcendent, between Life and world. In spite of Grünewald's innovative re-elaboration of the iconographic tradition, recipients reasonably continue to consider the result a representation of the resurrected Christ. This identification of what they see cannot be considered insignificant with regard to the pure emotions that the painting provokes in us through its unique composition of forms and colors. On the contrary, it offers the opportunity

29 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 131.

30 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 129.

to create a symbolic space in which to name these emotions, in themselves impenetrable.

This interpretation seems to be confirmed by Henry's concluding statement: »The Issenheim Altarpiece does not represent life; instead, it allows life to be felt within ourselves.«[31] If representation is not all the altarpiece is about, it does also represent: the duplicity of appearance, for once, does not create a strong opposition between pathos and representation but rather a space for possible exchanges. Thus, the aesthetic experience, in manifesting the primacy of the pathic element, also shows a capacity for the communication, in a non-illusory way, of the content of the emotions, using the resources of culture and history, language and symbols.

The particular value of Henry's rereading of Kandinsky lies exactly in its implicit acknowledgment of this possible exchange which goes beyond the suspicion towards the phenomenological qualities of that which is intentionally perceived. Led by Kandinsky's intuitions about the fundamentals of aesthetic theory, Henry is obliged to reconstitute its dignity to the transcendent appearance of phenomena. Affirming the move towards abstraction in every artistic representation is not enough to annul its representational content, which is always primarily a content imagined by the artist and then entrusted to the forms and harmony of the composition. Henry writes: »The imagination is the proper history of subjectivity. The imagination is the expansion of its pathos.«[32] The imagination allows the appearance in the external world of that of which the world knows nothing, or better, should say nothing, because of the strong dualism between Life and world postulated by Henry. Thanks to the imagination, thus, and to an artist's talent, the barrier of incommunicability between the interior and the exterior can be disrupted. Thanks to the imagination, again, we are not condemned to exile from ourselves in a world in which everything comes into sight except the only things that really count: Life and its pathos.

31 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 132. But a year before, in *Barbarism*, Henry said: »*Art is the representation of life*« (36, original emphasis). This apparent shift in Henry's thinking, in considering the possibility of something as an artistic »representation«, is significant for Henry's awareness of the philosophical complexity of the question, notwithstanding its customary consequences.

32 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 125.

5. Conclusion: An Appeal to Theology

Thus the sphere of art and aesthetics represents a place of resistance to the pure objectivation of phenomena. Art reveals that in what appears in the world, there is more than what appears, and, in so doing, art expresses something that is also part of our ordinary experience of the world. Art is, in Henry's concluding words in his essay on Kandinsky, »the resurrection of the eternal life«,[33] that is, the overflowing into the world of that which does not belong to the world. The religious tenor of this statement, confirmed by many others in *Seeing the Invisible*, requires us to come back to the parallel between aesthetic and religious experience evoked at the beginning.

In *Barbarism*, Henry develops the idea that as cultural forms, art and religion take part in the process through which life realizes its continuous coming-to-itself, increasing its potentialities.[34] As the last bastions of culture in a world dominated by science, art and religion open us up to a »knowledge of life as a knowing where life constitutes at the same time the power that knows and what is known by it«.[35] They represent a point of contact with the inner and invisible truth. It is interesting to note how the author rescues aesthetic and religious experiences, on the basis of their capability to intercept the originary passivity and affectivity of human beings and to recognize this originarity as 'sacred', that is, withdrawn from any kind of manipulation. Art is the implementation of the powers of sensibility,[36] those powers that human beings cannot explain or measure but just feel as the feeling itself in which the self is given.

Could theology not find in these reflections an opportunity to renew its own language which is so sorely lacking of terms and concepts that are able to escape the binary of interior and exterior? In its long history, the motif of the spiritual senses was one (not entirely successful)[37] attempt to correct the ›lack of sensibility‹ in theological reasoning. But in the light of Henry's phenomenological model, the expression ›spiritual senses‹ should not be read as an oxymoron but rather as the precise description of the relationship

33 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 142.
34 Henry, Barbarism, 5; ch. 2 in the same volume focuses especially on art.
35 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 37.
36 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 48.
37 See also Chapter 5 in this volume.

between sensibility and that which grounds it, namely originary affectivity. Then this theological expression loses its exhortative connotation, which remains inserted into a binary scheme (the incitement to go beyond the physical senses and to develop the spiritual and most valuable ones), and acquires an ontological meaning. Every feeling is spiritual, not because I must make an effort to add ›something‹ to what I physically feel but because whatever I feel ›talks‹ about Life which is in myself and in which I am given to myself as more than myself.

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Chapter 5
Aisthetic Theology
Sensory Knowing and Believing

Stefanie Knauss

1. Introduction

In the sense we use this term in this volume, aesthetic theology deals with the senses, with the knowledge of God and religious experience derived from sensory perception in the encounter with the arts, with the beautiful.[1] However, over the intellectual history of the West, in particular in consequence of the Enlightenment focus on rationality, both philosophical and theological reflections on aesthetics have lost the original focus on the sensory and material quality of the experience of art and its relevance for knowledge and faith and, instead, they have tended to intellectualize the aesthetic experience.[2] However, as we argue throughout this volume, attention to the embodied, material dimension of the encounter between art and viewer is fundamental in order to understand how the aesthetic can become an occasion for the transcendent to irrupt into the immanent. In this chapter, I will tease out in

1 Gesa E. Thiessen, General Introduction, in: Gesa E. Thiessen (ed.), Theological Aesthetics: A Reader, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 1–7, here 1.

2 See for example Grace Jantzen, Beauty for Ashes: Notes on the Displacement of Beauty, Literature & Theology 16.4 (2002), 427–449. David Freedberg points out art historians' reluctance to acknowledge the sensory, sensual impact of art, as if bodily reactions to work of arts, in particular sexual excitement, were not worthy of study; David Freedberg, The Power of Images, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989, 316.

more detail what we mean by ›material dimension‹ and how it shapes both aesthetic theology and the aesthetic-religious experience.[3] The Greek root of ›aesthetic‹ – *aisthesis*, ›to perceive with one's senses‹ – will guide my reflections, following Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka's argument »for an understanding of aesthetics as *aisthesis*, that is, as perception, sensibility or sensation, emphasising the cultural formation of the senses«.[4] I begin with a brief outline of the development of the system of the five senses familiar to the Western tradition, underlining the cultural constructedness of the senses and their moral and religious evaluation. Turning to the theological discussion of the senses and especially the notion of the spiritual senses, I will focus on the role of the senses as a means of perceiving God in the theological tradition. The sensory encounter with a particular work of art, *Self Growth* (2002) by the British artist Tracey Emin, together with the analysis of the role of embodiment in the artist's work more in general, will help trace the contours of an aisthetic theology that remains connected to the senses as the foundation of the encounter with the transcendent in art. I will conclude with a brief reflection on the role of the senses in theology and faith.

2. Worlds of Senses

Although all human beings are sensory beings by nature, this does not mean that sensations are perceived and understood in the same way across individuals and cultures. Senses and sensory perceptions are both culturally constructed and construct culture, at the same time as individual reliance on different senses varies due to diverse capacities and preferences (which, of course, might again be culturally shaped). In the Western context, we are used to organize sensory perceptions into the five categories of vision, hear-

3 Over the past three or so decades, the aesthetics of religion has developed as an approach in the field of religious studies which addresses similar questions related to the role of body and senses in religion and religious experience that I develop here from a theological perspective; see for example Alexandra Grieser/Jay Johnston, What Is an *Aesthetics of Religion*? From the Senses to Meaning and Back Again, in: Alexandra Grieser/Jay Johnston (eds.), Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017, 1–49.

4 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.

ing, smell, taste, and touch (missing the senses of proprioception and equilibrioception).[5] Because of the connection of these sensations to the visible sense organs, this division appears ›natural‹ but other cultures have widely different sensory systems, including, for example, senses that can perceive a ghost or the moral character of a person.[6] And even within Western culture, the number, organization, and hierarchy of the senses, how they function, and what their tasks are, have been conceptualized in many different ways over time. Thus, a history of the senses is always also the history of a culture and a society.

In the West, the systematization of the five senses has been accompanied by a hierarchization of sense perceptions with regard to their perceived epistemic reliability and their moral and economic value with profound influence on all spheres of human life, up to the point that insurance companies pay more in case of loss of sight than hearing.[7] Traditionally, the senses have been differentiated into the superior, more objective senses of distance (vision and hearing) and the inferior, more subjective senses of proximity (touch and taste). Smell takes on a middle position because it allows a sensory perception at a certain distance but is still more ›bodily‹ than the distant senses. Thus Kant understands smell as a sense of taste ›at a distance‹ and groups it with the subjective senses (the senses of pleasure, as he defines them).[8] The distant senses are generally perceived to be superior because they are less immediately physical, more intellectual and more objective, while the senses of proximity are taken to be inferior, because bodily, subjective, more ›primitive‹, and even potentially dangerous because inducing overwhelming passions. This systematization of perceptions in superior and inferior ones reflects and reinforces the Western distinction between bodily-subjective and rational-intellectual, apparently objective, universal forms of knowledge, with a clear preference for the latter. Consequently, greater emphasis is placed on

5 Waltraud Naumann-Beyer, Anatomie der Sinne im Spiegel von Philosophie, Ästhetik, Literatur, Köln: Böhlau, 2003, 11–13.

6 See for example Donald F. Tuzin, Base Notes: Odor, Breath and Moral Contagion, in: Jim Drobnick (ed.), The Smell Culture Reader, Oxford: Berg, 2006, 59–67, here 62.

7 Susan Stewart, Remembering the Senses, in: David Howes (ed.), Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 59–69, here 62.

8 Immanuel Kant, Objective and Subjective Senses: The Sense of Taste, in: Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.), The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 209–214, here 211.

the senses that contribute to these forms of knowledge at a distance (seeing and hearing) in the sciences, the arts, and everyday life. As Yi-Fu Tuan notes, aesthetic experience is often described as requiring the distance permitted by hearing and seeing so that the subject will not be too overwhelmed by their perceptions and capable of impartial value judgements.[9] The fact that in many languages, terms taken from the sphere of taste (›good taste‹) are used to evaluate an aesthetic experience with ethical undertones, however, shows that the sensory system and its hierarchy is not altogether coherent, perhaps in recognition of the fact that aesthetic experience is fundamentally an embodied and synesthetic experience.[10]

While this hierarchy of the senses is relatively uncontroversial within the tradition, their moral evaluation from a religious perspective is much more ambiguous. All senses can be source and evidence of both salvation and damnation. An unpleasant odor, for example, is imagined to permeate the sulfurous underworld,[11] but the tree of life in paradise is also distinguished by its scent, this one being particularly sweet, according to Jacob Böhme.[12] A sweet smell emanating from a person might indicate their sainthood,[13] but if somebody is surrounded by a pungent odor, this cannot simply be taken as a sign that they are sinners; instead, it could also be an olfactory indication of their ascetic enthusiasm which led to the neglect of personal hygiene. However, when the sweet smells of paradise are recreated in perfumes with names such as Obsession, Deseo or, quite simply, Sexy, they clearly become the devil's instruments. Further problems arise from the association of sensory perception with sexuality already hinted at in the names of perfumes: the softness of touch, the enthralling sound of a voice, or sweet scents are not innocent pleasures but have the potential to excite passion and desire, and thus they mean trouble – on the spiritual as well as social level. The ›gates‹

9 Yi-Fu Tuan, Pleasures of the Proximate Senses: Eating, Taste, and Culture, in: Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.), The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 226–235, here 226.

10 Vivian Sobchack, Embodying Transcendence: On the Literal, the Material, and the Cinematic Sublime, Material Religion 4.2 (2008), 194–203.

11 William I. Miller, Darwin's Disgust, in: David Howes (ed.), Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 335–354, here 349.

12 Constance Classen, The Breath of God: Sacred Histories of Scent, in: Jim Drobnick (ed.), The Smell Culture Reader, Oxford: Berg, 2006, 375–390, here 387.

13 Classen, The Breath of God, 381.

of the senses, as they were described traditionally, are open to both good and evil; there is a very slippery slope from innocently pleasant sensations to social and moral corruption, and, consequently, sensory perceptions have to be well-guarded and controlled. This moral ambiguity of sensoriality is beautifully expressed in a 15th-century woodcut in which the five senses are positioned between the ten commandments and the seven deadly sins, showing that their influence on the individual could be both good and evil.[14]

In this hierarchization and evaluation of the senses, gender plays an important role. In the past, the superior, intellectual, objective, and distant senses with their associated rational forms of reasoning were usually linked with masculinity, while the inferior, bodily, subjective senses and more intuitive, emotional forms of knowing were understood to be feminine, an association that reaffirmed the judgement of the proximate senses as dangerous, in particular because of their role in sexual seduction.[15] Yet given the bodily nature of all senses and the moral risk they equally represent, the limited connection of just the proximate senses with women was abolished over time, and all five senses became associated with femininity. This gendering of the senses has permeated culture as a whole as is reflected in their visual representations.[16] From the 16th century onwards, the senses are predominantly represented as women, as in the famous tapestries of *The Lady and the Unicorn* (15th/16th century) or in Hans Markart's paintings of the five senses (1872–1879).

This brief overview of the systematization and hierarchization of the senses shows that sensory perceptions are not simply a natural given, the consequence of biological evolution, but also subject to cultural construction through the evaluation of their moral and epistemological functions. On their part, they also contribute to the project of cultural construction of identity, for example by their association with gender which, in a circular movement, affirms the devaluation of both femininity (too sensorial) and the senses (too feminine). Thus, how we perceive, how we interpret our

14 Carl Nordenfalk, The Five Senses in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 48 (1985), 1–22, here 4.

15 Constance Classen, The Witch's Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity, in: David Howes (ed.), Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 70–84, here 70–71.

16 Nordenfalk, The Five Senses, 7.

perceptions, and the value we give them does not result in a neutral knowledge of the world, but through the attribution of symbolic meaning to our perceptions, social and/or religious orders are established and individuals are organized as cooperative parts of a community. The senses are not simply open gates through which the world enters and makes itself known, but they themselves create worlds.[17]

3. Theologies of the Senses

The theological engagement with the senses is marked by an ambivalent attitude, torn between intellectualization, and thus exclusion of the sensory, and its integration into forms of theological knowing and encounter with God. In the Bible, the language of sense perceptions is employed frequently to describe how the transcendent can become known in immanence, and thus the scriptures develop their own analogical *aisthesis* of knowing God sensorially.[18] God reveals God's name out of the burning bush, addressing both hearing and vision (Ex 3,1–6). The commandments are described as sweet like honey (Ps 19,10), and the faithful are called to taste and see God's goodness (Ps 34,8). In the story of Jacob's fight with God, the encounter with God is described as intensely tactile, a struggle that leaves Jacob limping (Gen 31,22–31). It is not only the faithful who perceive God through all their senses, but God also relates to the world and human beings sensorially. The God of the Bible is a God who listens and looks, who is moved by the sweet scent of incense offerings, but when disappointed, is repulsed by their smell (Am 5,21). The most uniquely sensory and sensual text in the Hebrew Bible is – unsurprisingly – the Song of Songs, whose opening verses introduce hearing, touch, taste, and smell as the means to experience and express attraction: »Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you, let us

17 S.B. Plate, The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred, CrossCurrents 62.2 (2012), 162–180, here 167.

18 Paul L. Gavrilyuk/Sarah Coakley, Introduction, in: Paul L. Gavrilyuk/Sarah Coakley (eds.), The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 1–19, here 1.

make haste. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you« (Song 1,1–4). In the rest of the book, nearly every verse refers to one of the senses, and all of them, inferior and superior, subjective and objective, distant and proximate are equally appreciated.

The sensory dimension of the encounter between God and humans is further reinforced in the incarnation of God in Jesus in the New Testament. The healing and redeeming relationship with Jesus Christ is clearly a sensory, embodied relationship.[19] God is encountered in the touch of Jesus' hands, the mud made from his spit that opens the eyes of the blind man (John 9,6), the taste of the wine at Cana (John 2,1–10), the scent of the oil of the woman at Bethany (Mark 14,3–8), the glow of the transfiguration (Mark 9,2–8). However, the aesthetics developed in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is far from uncomplicated. Sensory perceptions are possibilities to see, taste, and feel God but in a way that does not restrict the transcendent to the immanence of the human-divine encounter. This is equally expressed when God passes in front of Moses (Ex 33–34) or when Thomas asks to touch Jesus' wound (John 20,27–29). Any attempt at empirical ›proof‹ of God via vision or touch remains unsatisfied: Moses sees only God's back, and we are not told if Thomas actually touches Jesus and what he feels; his affirmation that this is indeed the risen Christ comes without tactile proof.

Even after Christ's resurrection and ascension, when an immediate, material encounter with the divine in the person of Jesus appears impossible for the generations to come, God continues to be present in the Holy Spirit who is smelled as a sweet scent, felt as a storm, or seen as fiery tongues. The sacraments, as signs and instruments of God's grace, also directly engage the senses so that they and their perception become the space of community with God in the scented oil of confirmation or the taste and texture of the eucharistic bread, the smell and taste of the wine, the vision of its red color, or the sounds of the communal prayers and songs of the liturgy.[20]

19 The strong sensoriality of the New Testament stories of Jesus' life has also inspired an iconographical tradition which associates each sense with a story/stories from Jesus' life, such as hearing with the annunciation, touch with the deposition or sight with the healing of the blind man; see Nordenfalk, The Five Senses, 21 (see also his note 105).

20 Gesa E. Thiessen, The Early Church: Introduction, in: Gesa E. Thiessen (ed.), Theological Aesthetics: A Reader, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 9–13, here 10–11.

The further theological development of the biblical foundations of the senses as a space of encounter with God is shaped by broader philosophical and social influences, in particular the shift from the more holistic Hebrew understanding of the human person to the more dualistic (neo-)Platonic anthropology with its emphasis on the mind and rationality as both the center of identity and the path to true knowledge. Tertullian can be seen as a representative of the holistic view of the human being which reflects in his theory of the senses developed in the tract *De anima*.[21] In his view, the soul is the seat of both intellect and senses. A body without soul cannot ›sense‹, and without sensory perceptions it is impossible to form opinions (17,5). Arguing against those who would like to separate intellect and senses, he underlines instead their mutual connection: »For is it not true, that to employ the senses is to use the intellect? And to employ the intellect amounts to a use of the senses?« (18,7). Tertullian emphasizes that the senses are not deceptive, as Plato and others would sustain; instead, their sensations are necessary for human beings to fully develop their existence (17,11). Thus, one should not doubt the senses, »lest we should even in Christ Himself, bring doubt upon the truth of their sensation; lest perchance it should be said that […] He did *not* really hear the Father's voice testifying of Himself; or that He was deceived in touching Peter's wife's mother« (17,13; original emphasis). For Tertullian, the senses are an indispensable part of the testimony of the Christ event and of the tradition of the church and its faith (17,14). If Tertullian was so concerned about the proper discipline of the body and its senses (with a tendency towards a perhaps exaggerated rigor), this was precisely because he was convinced of their necessary importance for the spiritual development of the person and not out of a dualistic negation of the body.[22]

Beginning with Origen, the theory of the spiritual senses as sensorium for the perception of God becomes the main context for future theological reflections on the senses, characterized by an ambivalent attitude towards the

21 Tertullian, A Treatise on the Soul, translated by Peter Holmes, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0160-0220,_Tertullianus,_De_Anima_[Schaff],_EN.pdf [accessed 2 October 2025].

22 Peter Brown, The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 76.

body.[23] Paul Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley summarize the varied understandings of the relationship between bodily and spiritual senses, seen as »operating in tandem or separately, or, alternatively, as two states of the same fivefold sensorium directed at different aspects of the same object, or perhaps at different objects altogether.«[24] One of the most important and influential proponents of the theology of the spiritual senses is probably Bonaventure. He underlines the twofold nature of the human being as constituted of soul and body, which requires a twofold sensorium, a twofold movement (of will and of body), a twofold good (visible and invisible), and so on.[25] While distinct from each other, the spiritual senses presuppose the corporeal senses which open the human being to the perception of the world, and through it, of its creator.[26] However, it is ultimately through the immaterial, spiritual dimension that human beings can know God, as is also indicated in the title of the main work in which he develops these thoughts, *Itinerarium mentis* [!] *in Deum*.[27] Notwithstanding his emphasis on the spiritual, Bonaventure describes the approach to God analogically in terms of physical sensoriality, as Gregory LaNave notes: »there is an immediacy to the knowledge of God in the spiritual senses that is best understood in comparison to the immediacy of corporeal sensation.«[28]

The human being's progress to God is an ascent in six grades from bottom up, from the material to the immaterial and spiritual. This ascent begins with the sensory perception of physical, temporal objects in the external world which contain traces of the divine, moves on to the consciousness of what is within ourselves, with the mind understood to be the image of God,

23 Gavrilyuk/Coakley, Introduction, 7.

24 Gavrilyuk/Coakley, Introduction, 5.

25 Bonaventure, Breviloquium, II 11,1. The French translation by Guy Bougerol and Luc Mathieu is available online: http://jesusmarie.free.fr/bonaventure_breviloquium.html [accessed 6 March 2025].

26 Gregory F. LaNave, Bonaventure, in: Paul L. Gavrilyuk/Sarah Coakley (eds.), The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 159–173, here 161. See Bonaventure, Breviloquium, II 9–11.

27 Bonaventure, Intinerarium mentis in Deum. The English translation (no translator given) used here is available online: https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1221-1274,_Bonaventura,_Itinerarium_Mentis_in_Deum,_EN-.pdf [accessed 6 March 2025]. Further reflections on the senses, both physical and spiritual, and the ascent to God can be found in his *Breviloquium*, in particular in part V,6.

28 LaNave, Bonaventure, 166.

to finally transcend ourselves towards the eternal (Itinerarium 1,2). Sensory perception and its contribution to mental operations reflects, in Bonaventure's view, the qualities of the divine, such as the creativity to form mental images of the world outside or the capacity for abstraction from imperfections that helps to think the perfect and ideal, which is God (Itinerarium 2,7–9). As the human being proceeds upwards and towards God, the interior senses, gifts of God's grace and ›fine-tuned‹ by a life in virtue, are able to perceive distinct aspects of the divine in distinct ways appropriate to each sense: »to sense the Most High Beauty, to hear the Most High Harmony, to smell the Most High Fragrance, to take a taste of the Most High Savor« (Itinerarium 4,3). However, the ultimate step in the progress towards God is beyond both the physical and the spiritual senses and beyond any rational cognition: it is the total abandon of both senses and intellectual reflection in a state of ecstasy (Itinerarium 7,1), an affective experience transmuted in God, a ›total‹ sensing that can no longer be attributed to any individual sense (Itinerarium 7,4).

The example of Bonaventure's conceptualization of the spiritual senses in their relationship to the corporeal ones and their function in a human being's ascent to the divine shows very well the ambiguity of the concept of the spiritual senses: on the one hand, given the sensory language used in the Bible to describe human perception of God and central doctrines such as creation, incarnation, and resurrection, the concept recognizes the close and necessary relationship between senses and reason, between *aisthesis* and *noiesis,* also with regard to knowing God.[29] On the other hand, the distinction between bodily and spiritual senses and their co-occurence on different anthropological planes ultimately leads to the spiritualization of the relation with the divine in which the corporeal senses play a role only in the initial steps in order to be overtaken by the spiritual senses. It was this second perspective of an intellectual, spiritual approach to knowing God which has come to dominate later theological reflections, often even without including the bodily senses as an initial but necessary step. Nevertheless, the former perspective, in which sensory and intellectual knowledge of God are integrated, has survived, in particular in mysticism and in pop-

29 This is also explicitly the case in William of Auxerre's writings; see Boyd T. Coolman, Knowing God by Experience: The Spiritual Senses in the Theology of William of Auxerre, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004.

ular religiosity, even though neither has been fully recognized by the theological mainstream.

In the writings of mystics – predominantly by women, but not only – from the late Middle Ages about their experiences of union with God, the distinction between bodily and spiritual senses is much more blurred than in Bonaventure's theology of the senses. As Bernard McGinn explains, for Hadewijch, »God becomes present to humans in a ›single sensorium‹, that is, as an embodied spirit in which there is a strong continuity between external acts of sensation […] and interior perceptions directed to realities that, while less physical, have no less direct an effect on the human person.«[30] John Milhaven also argues that mystical knowledge of God is embodied knowledge,[31] achieved particularly through the senses of touch, taste, and smell, senses that otherwise are considered inferior. Their subjectivity and immediacy is not a problem in this perspective but rather that which enables an experience that reaches into the profound depths of a person. In the sensory and sensual relationship with the divine, not only does the mystic sense God (usually as Christ), but Christ derives sensory pleasure from the encounter as well, in a reciprocal relationship.[32] Given the close link between the sensory and the sensual mentioned above, the frequent use of nuptial and erotic language inspired by the Song of Songs in mystical texts does not surprise: here, the sensuality and eroticism evoked by the senses are not the consequence of their sinfulness but, rather, the senses become, through the intense desire they evoke, the means to transcend the immanent and achieve union with God in a pleasure that goes beyond any bodily limitations.

While not reducing God to a reality of the world that could be perceived empirically through sense perception alone, the mystical and theological use of sensory language nevertheless points towards the fact that neither is it possible to perceive God without any involvement of the senses insofar as they are a fundamental part of human cognition. Human beings are

30 Bernard McGinn, Late Medieval Mystics, in: Paul L. Gavrilyuk/Sarah Coakley (eds.), The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 190–209, here 196.

31 John Giles Milhaven, Hadewijch and Her Sisters: Other Ways of Loving and Knowing, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993; John Giles Milhaven, A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing: Women's Experience and Men's Thought, Journal of the American Academy of Religion 57.2 (1989), 341–372.

32 Milhaven, Hadewijch and Her Sisters, 16–21.

caught in the paradoxicality that they are limited to their immanent situation of embodied existence and yet, they draw on the immanent precisely in order to transcend it. The theological reaction to this paradoxical situation cannot be to try to escape the senses in order to focus exclusively on the transcendent, as has happened in the neo-Platonic tradition, but rather to engage with the senses in a more profound way in order to understand how an encounter with the transcendent can be possible in the immanence of the human sensorium. As we argue throughout this volume, one way to return to a more integrated vision of the human being's sensory and spiritual dimensions and their involvement in the relationship with the divine is to consider and highlight the aisthetic, that is, the sensory, dimension of aesthetic experience.

4. The Materiality of *Self Growth*

The artwork *Self Growth* (fig. 1) by Tracey Emin addresses questions of the senses, sensoriality, sensuality, embodiment, and materiality on different levels, and thus it provides an excellent opportunity to explore in more depth the sensory element in the encounter with art and its contribution to aesthetic theology. *Self Growth* is an embroidery on a white bed sheet, showing, sketched in few stark black lines, a nude female body without her head, the torso at the bottom of the sheet and slightly angled, with spread, bent legs, and feet in high heels. Out of her vagina grows an equally sketchy, orange-red flower, with leaves growing close to the body, suggesting the growth of pubic hair, and with a flower high on its stalk, recognizable as a slightly angled female head. The title *Self Growth* – personal development, formation of subjectivity and self-consciousness – may relate to the embroidered face that stands for the person and her personality, the natural development of both a flower and a human person, their growing, flowering, and withering. The self of this woman grows out of her sex and is literally rooted and based in her sexual identity and lived sexuality, in her experiences of pleasure and pain.

Fig. 1: Tracey Emin, *Self Growth* (2002), embroidery on white bed sheet, 174 x 150 cm. [33]

33 As reproduced in David Ebony/Jane Harris/Frances Richard/Martha Schwendener/Sarah Valdez/Linda Yablonsky (eds.), Curve: The Female Nude Now, New York: Universe Publishing, 2003, 90.

For the viewer, the rendering of the image in just a few embroidered lines frees up the space of their imagination in which ambivalent associations may develop, based on personal experiences or those of others, of how a woman's lived sexuality can be a means of furthering, inhibiting, or influencing her growth in various ways. It is a self whose traits are only hinted at. It remains hidden and inaccessible, even though it is shown in its intimacy. The face cannot be identified; the long hair and the title might indicate that the artist refers to herself, as she does in many other works, too. But because of its reduced form, the work is not a simple representation of the elaboration of the artist's personal issues; instead, it remains open to multiple meanings that viewers might develop in their encounter with it.

The vertical axis, emphasized through the flower stalk and the orientation of the lower body, together with the diagonals of the legs, the upper body, and the face, add a sense of dynamic movement, yet also instability, to the representation. With the face growing straight up on the slim – too slim? – stalk, traced in angular but subtle lines, distanced from the body over which it seems to float, this growing self, on the one hand, appears to be dynamic, proud, and self-confident, but, on the other hand, it seems also insecure and precarious. How strong and solid is the connection between the flower and its ground? What does it take to uproot the self? Is the body its base, the ground from which it grows, or something to rise above? How is the relation between body and self to be imagined? What kind of experiences (positive, empowering, and/or negative, painful) have nourished the self? In just a few lines, the ambiguity, instability, and complexity of Emin's work evokes numerous questions and offers plenty of food for thought.[34]

Tracey Emin (born in 1963) is an artistically and financially[35] successful English-Turkish artist as well as a kind of society celebrity in the UK. In her work, she focuses in particular on her/the female body, female sexuality, and the story of her life and love in an intimate, explicit, sometimes offen-

34 Ali Smith, Tracey Emin: ›What You See Is What I Am‹, The Guardian, 7 May 2001, http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/may/07/tracey-emin-ali-smith-hayward [accessed 7 March 2025].

35 One of her works, an embroidered blanket, is said to have raised £800.000 at an auction for The Elton John Aids Foundation. Emin has dealt with this aspect of her art in her works, e. g. in the photo *I've Got It All* (2000); see Peter Osbourne, Greedy Kunst, in: Mandy Merck/Chris Townsend (eds.), The Art of Tracey Emin, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, 40–59.

sive, and perhaps also exciting way. She is particularly known for her Turner Prize-nominated installation *My Bed* (1998), which refers to existential moments that are related to this place (sex, sleep, birth, death, depression, passion, etc.), and a tent which she embroidered with the names of all the persons with whom she literally had slept (*Everybody I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, 1995). In her »obsessively confessional oeuvre«, as Simon Wilson describes it,[36] the most intimate, personal aspects of her life are made accessible to the public through diverse artistic media. But Emin goes far beyond a narcissistic self-representation in her art, discussing questions, hopes, and fears that are central to human existence.[37] With her critique of the distinction between the private and the public or political, her reflections on female subjectivity and sexuality, gender relations, the male-dominated art market, and a history of art that has been literally his-story, Emin is closely related to the feminist movement in British and international art. But her work also challenges feminist ideas, such as her embrace of the sexual. As Rosemary Betterton concludes in her analysis of the feminist aspect in Emin's work: »Emin has developed her own language for dealing with sexual inequalities, which is neither traditionally feminine, nor feminist, but articulates a new kind of independent and iconoclastic femininity in all its complexity and contradictions.«[38]

The encounter with Emin's art creates a particular sense of »intimacy«, as Jennifer Doyle writes: »[i]t sets the stage for a fantasy encounter – between her, and you, and me. Emin's work invites us to take it personally.«[39] This intimate relationship between viewer, work, and artist is in particular due to the fact that the encounter is bodily mediated on several levels: in the mate-

36 Simon Wilson, Tracey Emin, in: The Turner Prize 1999: An Exhibition of Work by the Shortlisted Artists: Tracey Emin Steve McQueen Steven Pippin Jane and Louise Wilson, 20 October 1999–6 February 2000, Tate Gallery, London: Tate Gallery, 1999, n. p.

37 Sarah Kent, Tracey Emin: Flying High, in: Tracey Emin/Neal Brown/Sarah Kent/Matthew Collings, Tracey Emin, London: Jay Jopling, 1998, 31–37, here 35. See also Jennifer Doyle, The Effect of Intimacy: Tracey Emin's Bad-sex Aesthetics, in: Mandy Merck/Chris Townsend (eds.), The Art of Tracey Emin, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002,102–118, here 112.

38 Rosemary Betterton, ›Why Is My Art Not as Good as Me?‹: Femininity, Feminism and ›Life-drawing‹ in Tracey Emin's Art, in: Mandy Merck/Chris Townsend (eds.), The Art of Tracey Emin, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, 23–38, here 38.

39 Doyle, The Effect of Intimacy, 114.

rials and techniques Emin uses, in the represented motifs and themes, and in the reception of her works.

Emin's œuvre develops, as already mentioned, out of her own varied experiences of bodily trauma and passion (such as sexual abuse, rape, pleasure, pain, abortion) and their influence on her development as a person and artist. But more than that, for Emin her body is also a means of gaining knowledge, much like the mystical embodied knowledge discussed above, although expressed in a very different language, for example in her film *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995): »I stopped shagging / but I was still flesh / and I still thought with my body«.[40] Her works of art can therefore be seen as the result of her thinking and knowing with her body, and thus bodiliness in all its aspects – the shape of a body, its parts, beauty, fluids, experiences – is the most important motif and also medium of her works.

This becomes obvious also in Emin's choice of material and technique: for *Self Growth*, she uses an apparently clean sheet, but, on occasion, she has also worked with used bedlinen, such as in *Picasso* (2001), on which her body inscribed itself in material traces of urine, blood, sweat, and other bodily fluids. Although apparently washed, the white sheet of *Self Growth* also evokes bodily presence, in a different way: a monogram, which is noticeable only upon close scrutiny of the work, identifies it as belonging to the Walpole Bay Hotel. This small marker brings a whole history of wear and tear to Emin's work, of people who slept on the sheet (or not) and thus left traces of themselves, their presence – *en passant,* in the fleetingness of a stay in a hotel – in the material. A sheet is also an article of daily household use, part of the housekeepers' routines in the hotel who make the beds for the guests and take the linen off again after their stay. It is not the kind of material that is dedicated to artistic use only, as it would be a canvas, to be bought in a specialist shop. Only through Emin's embroidery, the sheet becomes a part of the world of art, yet without leaving behind its mundane past which adds its own important contribution to the work in the form of presences, memories, and associations.[41]

40 Excerpt included as Tracey Emin, Why I Never Became a Dancer, in: Tracey Emin/Neal Brown/Sarah Kent/Matthew Collings, Tracey Emin, London: Jay Jopling, 1998, 28.

41 This is also the case in the embroidery *Say Goodbye to Mummy* (2002) which deals with her experience of abortion; here, the sheet becomes a kind of shroud for the aborted fetuses.

Embroidery, the technique used to ›paint‹ *Self Growth*, is also an extremely immediate, material, and bodily technique. Like quilting or appliqué, diaries, handwriting – all techniques and genres used by Emin – it is a traditionally feminine activity, (dis)qualified as a craft rather than art. Women stich traditional, pretty patterns and monograms on the linens of their dowries, a skill that certainly requires patience and ability but normally would not be described as creative or artistic. The male genius, on the other hand, creates original and challenging art, with great gesture and a phallic brush. Emin takes up this feminine craft and the materials of the equally feminine sphere of the household but in an ironic and subversive, shocking and critical way. She uses the time-consumingly small-stitched embroidery in order to sketch her motif in spontaneous, generous lines, seemingly the work of a moment of inspiration. And instead of modest monograms, the embroidery ›paints‹ a female nude body from whose vagina grows a self whose identity remains uncertain and cannot be reduced to two letters. A similarly ironic statement about the world of ›high art‹ is noticeable in Emin's work *Picasso*, showing a woman sitting with spread legs, with the word ›Picaso‹ [sic] underneath, embroidered on a used sheet. In an interview, Emin expresses a critical view of Picasso saying: »I thought that Picasso was this great genius, this great artist and great man, yet he treated women disgustingly«,[42] and she shows her criticism of Picasso's distorted female bodies, his relations with women, and the mechanisms of the art market and its celebrity cult through her embroidery and the missing S in the name of this ›god‹ of the arts.

With these materials and techniques, the artist involves her body and her self in a concrete, material fashion in the creative process, and underlines the bodiliness and materiality of the work itself. At the same time, the embodied dimension of the process of reception is highlighted, which from the perspective of aisthesis can be recognized as an encounter between the bodies of the viewer, the artist, and the work in their variously realized material

42 Jean Wainwright, Interview with Tracey Emin, in: Mandy Merck/Chris Townsend (eds.), The Art of Tracey Emin, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, 195–209, here 197. In the same interview (200), Emin emphasizes that her spelling mistakes are simply due to the fact that she left school when she was thirteen and never learnt to spell properly; it seems reasonable to assume that in this case, a dose of ironic intentionality was also involved; in any case, the missing S shows a certain unimpressed nonchalance in her dealings with the ›great‹ artist.

presences. Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka describe reception as an »immersive approach where the viewer is no longer only a viewer, but rather the subject of an embodied encounter.«[43] When looking at *Self Growth*, viewers might experience bodily reactions of pleasure, disgust, or revulsion facing the represented body and especially the image of female genitals which are still often considered taboo in art and, if at all, relegated to pornographic images.[44] Furthermore, in a kind of imaginative mimesis of body posture, recipients might feel the discomfort and tension in the positioning of the woman's body; they might experience in their own body the exposure to the views of others, or perhaps get a sense of the openness for what might grow out of one's body that is expressed in the artwork.

This personal, embodied involvement is required even more because of the reduced representation of the image in a few lines in *Self Growth*. In order to make a meaningful whole of the shapes and lines of the embroidery, it is necessary to take one's time and look closely, to imaginatively fill in the empty spaces, to retrace the gestures and postures of the body in order to feel what they might express, and to experience the long process of creating the work when looking at the stiches of the embroidery. Through this investment of themselves in the form of imagination and bodily presence, the viewers become a part of the work, and the work a part of them in the moment of reception. The work cannot be consumed passively but requires commitment, patience, openness, and attention so that a space opens up in which sense can emerge from the senses, a sense which is not predefined but develops out of the contact between work and recipient. The viewer is thus indirectly included in the relationship between artwork and artist and becomes a participant in the creative process, blurring the boundaries between creation, work, and reception. In this intense, personal encounter with the artwork and with the artist, from body to body, »doors for new thoughts and new

43 Papenburg/Zarzycka, Introduction, 3.

44 Ann-Sophie Lehmann discusses the absence of representations of the vagina over the course of art history, where, with rare exceptions such as Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866), female genitalia were not represented or censored (painted over) in art created for public consumption, leaving their visualization to the private sphere of pornography; see Ann-Sophie Lehmann, The Missing Sex: Absence and Presence of a Female Body Part in Visual Arts, in: Barbara Baert (ed.), Fluid Flesh: The Body, Religion and the Visual Arts, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009, 107–122, here 107 and 112.

experiences«[45] are opened, as Emin hopes for her art to do, new experiences that may leave a more or less conscious trace in the recipient and their life.

The embodied nature of the creation and reception processes surrounding *Self Growth* as well as of the work itself (and Emin's other works) are further expressed on a different level, namely through the conscious acceptance of the artist's embeddedness in a particular (art) history and culture which influences how she deals with themes such as the female body and female sexuality, and how she draws on or challenges the conventions of their representation. An artwork does not exist in an empty space, nor is it experienced in a vacuum. Its production and reception are at the same time intensely subjective and personal, and shaped by socio-cultural and historical factors, such as motifs and their tradition (e. g. the history of the female nude; cultural associations with high heels); references to the history of art, artists' styles, or particular techniques (Schiele's drawings; embroidery); the logics of the (art) market in which sexuality is always a good subject to raise attention; the social context in which it is (still) not quite acceptable for a woman to explicitly represent (her own) female sexuality – all these are factors that form and deform the aesthetic language of the artist, the materiality of the works, and how they speak to the viewers. On the one hand, the excitement and controversy created by Emin's representations of the female body and its sexuality are deployed in order to achieve success in the art and gallery scene;[46] but on the other hand, she criticizes this mechanism as well: in *Self Growth*, the woman seems to offer her vagina, placed nearly in the middle of the sheet, to the spectator in a position reminding of pornographic images, apparently reduced to the object of somebody else's pleasure given that she does not have a head. But her vagina is not the source of another person's satisfaction but of her own subjectivity, the foundation of her self. Her genitals are not denied as a nameless place of shame and self-negation but are the ground from which the precarious, yet proud flower of herself grows, out of pain and pleasure. In its sketchiness and through the intimacy

45 Tracey Emin, quoted in Wilson, Tracey Emin, n. p.

46 As a member of the Royal Academy of Arts and as the representative of the UK at the Biennale 2007, Emin is closely connected to the contemporary ›official‹ and ›established‹ art scene in the UK; experiences of social and cultural marginalization because of the artist's origins and biography are however clearly a part of her work which is again and again directed against the social mainstream; see Smith, Tracey Emin.

of material and technique, *Self Growth* is an explicit yet discreet representation of female sexuality and subjectivity which expresses both the possibility of their realization and the permanent threat of their defeat.

5. The Aisthetic in Theology and Faith

Emin's work *Self Growth*, its production, and reception allow us to see more clearly how the senses, and through them, our embodied nature, are the means for human beings to know even beyond what is immediately accessible to the senses in this mutual interaction between *aisthesis* and *noesis* that Tertullian describes, or, as Laura Marks notes from a contemporary phenomenological perspective: the senses operate »between the sensible and the thinkable«.[47] Looking at the stitches of the embroidery, I see not simply the lines they trace, but I feel their texture and the process of their creation. Seeing the white sheet on which the woman with her flowery head are embroidered, I do not simply see the white ground of an embroidery, but I am reminded of the more personal use of a bed sheet, and perhaps even feel the presence of those unknown persons who have slept in it during their stay at the Walpole Bay Hotel. The woman that Emin stitched is not necessarily a representation of the artist herself or a literal expression of her formation of self and identity, but posture and metaphors (the flower, high heels) nevertheless allow viewers to see and know development, subjectivity, and a sense of self – perhaps not only in how they understand the artwork as an expression of these experiences but also in the memory of their own – perhaps painful, perhaps pleasurable – embodied, sexual experiences that contributed to making them the persons they are.

These dimensions of the viewer's sensory and intellectual involvement with the work are not clearly distinct or sequential; I do not first look, then feel, then understand, but instead, the encounter with the artwork is a dynamic continuum of sensory experiences and intellectual operations that mutually enable and enrich each other. In the interaction, and even more, integration, of the sensory and the intellectual, the imagination as the capacity

47 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.

to re-present past memories and imagine new futures plays a particularly important role because it helps to ›translate‹ what is seen (for example, a woman with spread legs) into a feeling (of being open or exposed) and to continue from there in imagining what it might take for a woman to feel at home in her body.

This aisthetic-noetic-imaginary experience of the artwork *Self Growth* contributes to the reflection of the aisthetic in aesthetic theology in two interrelated ways. First, it is an experience of transcendence of what is empirically present in and through sensory perception, and thus it provides the occasion to both experience and understand something that seems paradoxical, not to say impossible: to reach beyond the material in the process of sensing the material. What I experience in the embodied reception of an artwork shows that the distinction between the perceptible and the imperceptible is perhaps not as clear as we were taught to believe in the tradition of Western empiricism. This is not to say that we ›see‹ ghosts or the future or God in the same way as we see our hand in front of our eyes, but instead that human forms of knowing could be thought of as a continuum of sensoriality, cognition, imagination, memory, and intuition integrated with each other in different measures. Taking seriously these multifaceted ways of knowing implies that previously undervalued dimensions of knowing, such as imagination, sensation, or intuition, should be taken into account in order to fully access all the perceptive and epistemological possibilities that humans have. This would also mean that aisthetic experiences of art – the sensory dimension of aesthetic experience – could and should be considered as possibilities for insight – such as the experience of being a situated, sensing body-self and yet at the same time, being able to transcend one's specific situation in reaching out to the work or to its creator.

In addition to this more theoretical, epistemological insight into the continuity of forms of knowing, from the perspective of aisthetic theology, the encounter with *Self Growth* also underlines the importance of embodiment for the human development of self, intersubjective relationships, and the relationship with the transcendent as well as the connection between these three fundamental human relationships. The first thought of a viewer in front of *Self Growth* will quite likely not be of God or the transcendent. But viewers might become aware of their embodied situation and the role of their body in becoming and being who they are. They might relate to the work's body

through their bodies and thus make the experience of intersubjective relationship. Perhaps their insights into who they are as embodied beings and how they see themselves will also make them think about how they want others to see them and relate to them. And in doing so, they already take a step beyond the immanent towards the transcendent of the unknown other person and their unknown future, sensing that in doing so, they need their bodies and their senses, and cannot leave them behind, as Plato would have us do in the ascent to the pure Ideas. Aisthetic theology attends to these sensory dimensions of human being in the world of which we become particularly aware in the intense embodied encounter with the material presence – the body – of an artwork (and its creator), and integrates them as a foundational element into its reflections on art, the encounter with art, and its possible participation in the human relationship with the transcendent. Thus aisthetic theology contributes to the understanding of the conditions for the act of faith, specifically through tracing the integration of senses and knowing.

The theology of the spiritual senses – while not always successful in avoiding the dualism between corporeal and spiritual senses – and the mystical tradition with its more integrated accounts of the experience of the divine »in a corporeo-spiritual totality«[48] provide reference points for the rediscovery of the senses and of sensory knowing in aesthetic theology. What we see, touch, hear, taste, and smell is not simply the raw material for our higher-level intellectual operations (nor are smell, touch, taste, etc. as clearly distinct as the Western system of the five senses suggests). Instead, our sensory perceptions are shaped by and shape the worlds we live in – and not only the world, but also that which goes beyond the world.

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48 McGinn, Late Medieval Mystics, 190.

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Chapter 6
Glass, Soil, and Feathers
An Encounter with Contemporary Liturgical Art

Stefanie Knauss and Davide Zordan

1. Introduction

The question we want to pose in this chapter could be formulated like this: is there an aesthetics of the sacred in Christianity? How can the connection between the religious form of Christian liturgy and the aesthetic expression in visual art be grasped and described so that it appears neither as a simple juxtaposition nor as a dialectical polarity nor as a relationship in which one instrumentalizes the other? Of course, we are not the first ones to ask this question; it is the consequence of the modern call for a separation of powers between religion and art. But this question continues to be asked today, again and again, and it seems as if the discussion is turning in circles. In the hopes that we will not just repeat the past but add something new to the discussion, our reflections will focus on the *experience* of modern or contemporary liturgical art, an aspect neglected in scholarship thus far. After a brief theoretical framing of the aspects of the question we pose here, we will focus on two examples of art created for the liturgical space, and the reception processes they initiate: the stained glass windows by Gerhard Richter in the Cathedral of Cologne (2007) and the intervention *W Erde Licht* by Elke Maier and Georg Planer in Klagenfurt Cathedral (2009).

In different ways, both of these works encourage a way of seeing that is beyond the instrumentalizing, grasping kind of seeing in everyday life and

is instead a contemplative seeing that is free from the limitations of content or meaning. While relating to the space of the church in which these works are placed, permanently or temporarily, they are not in service of this space and the liturgy taking place in it but they co-create the space as sacred in the mutual relationships between artwork, space, and viewers that are enacted in different ways in different moments in time and with different individuals. Thus, when we speak of ›liturgical art‹ in the following, while we discuss works situated in the liturgical space of the church, we do not refer here to those works that are predetermined by ecclesial authorities as belonging to the sacred space of the church or that are created to serve the liturgical practices performed in it via external criteria of subject matter or use. Instead, further developing the thoughts we have pursued throughout this volume, we consider how these works may be integrated into the ›total work‹ of the liturgy performed in space and community through how they are experienced by their viewers in time and space.

2. An Attempt at a Differentiated Evaluation

It might be helpful to start these reflections with a simple fact that is often overlooked, namely the sheer quantity of objects of sacred art and architecture. Evaluations of the artistic production of the church in late modernity until today often employ an exclusively Western or, even more narrowly, Eurocentric perspective which delimits the appreciation of this broad, diverse enterprise in its world-wide expanse. Since the end of the 19th century, more churches, chapels, baptisteries, prayer rooms, tabernacles, paintings, sculptures, liturgical vessels, church furniture, devotional objects and so on have been created around the world than ever before. It is easy to lose sight of this fact in the de-Christianized Western context where churches are no more than the traces of an illustrious past and of interest primarily as tourist attractions, and while aesthetically appreciated, they are really quite superfluous, often having to be protected from being pulled down or converted to other uses. In other parts of the world, however, the creation of liturgical art and sacred spaces of various Christian denominations continues and flourishes alongside the growth of Christianity outside of the European-North-Atlantic area, and thus the questions we are asking about

it here are of abiding interest. Furthermore, this awareness of the multitude of Christian artworks of various genres further underlines the public dimension of Christianity in an increasingly plural global context and can be seen as a measure of the capacity of Christianity to communicate its values openly and publicly.

The issue of Christian liturgical art (not: *Christian* art, as discussed in previous chapters) is complex because the parameters of the discussion vary depending on the context: Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, European or non-European, Western, Westernized, or Indigenous. It is therefore important to avoid generalizations. If the way in which liturgical space is artistically formed not only expresses Christian faith and practice but also shapes it, we have to acknowledge that this space also expresses the diversity, even contradictoriness, of faith. For the European Catholic context, which provides the primary context for this chapter, the most prominent aspect is certainly the continual difficulty of the church to relate in a constructive fashion to new forms of artistic expression and communication. But there are signs, even if few, that point to the beginning of a fruitful dialogue between ecclesial sponsors and artists to be taken up in further theoretical reflections on liturgical art.

But isn't it problematic in itself to qualify art through its use within the liturgical space of a church? How can one justify the determination of the artwork through the finality of its use given the autonomy achieved for art in modernity, and also given the fact that the artwork in itself does not have a finality and does not exist for a particular, externally attributed use, nor for pedagogical instruction, nor as the underpinning of ideological constructs but as sheer, revealing form? One could certainly argue that the finality of an artwork for liturgical use is not the same as any other utilitarian purpose and that Christian liturgy itself, like art, is beyond the confines of everyday life with its clearly defined interests and finalities. Liturgy as the epiphany of the sacred[1] cannot – and should not – ascribe a more specific or objective finality to art than it has itself, which can only be described in terms of anticipation, as the prefiguration of the fullness of life in community with other human beings, with all of creation, and with God.[2] This very general state-

1 Romano Guardini, Die Sinne und die religiöse Erkenntnis, 2nd ed., Würzburg: Werkbund Verlag, 1958, 51.

2 Joseph Ratzinger, The Spirit of the Liturgy, translated by John Saward, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000, 14.

ment has to be concretized in its importance for the specific relationships between ecclesial sponsors (dioceses, arts committees, priests, etc.) and the artists who are commissioned with the realization of works to be exhibited, temporarily or permanently, in the space of the church.

Yet in spite of the recognition that art not be instrumentalized for external purposes, the question of art's finality in the liturgical context remains a central issue in the debates surrounding it, especially when it is employed in the attempt to control artistic creativity. In 1950, in the journal *L'Art Sacré*, the French Dominican Marie-Alain Couturier, a progressive thinker in these issues, summarizes the most frequent objections against the commissioning of great contemporary artists for the decoration of new churches. The main argument is not that they are non-believers or too expensive, but that »*[t]hey will not do what we want*«.[3] Couturier answers thus: »Thank God! for too often ›what we want‹, what people like, is far inferior to what great artists would do even if left to their inspiration alone. And, in any case, experience proves that even when he [sic] is left to his own inspiration, what a great artist produces out of himself is infinitely more valid than the inevitable trash done by docile second-raters, these being generally obliging in proportion to their mediocrity.«[4] But Couturier's rigid – and somewhat polemical – distinction between artworks by artists who obey any demand by ecclesial authorities and art created by artists who abandon themselves completely to their own creative powers shows that Couturier has given up on the possibility of a constructive negotiation between artists and ecclesial sponsors because of the latters' unjustified claims to control the artists.

It has to be kept in mind that Couturier wrote this in 1950, that is, before the Second Vatican Council which, however, in this particular aspect, did not entirely eliminate the ambiguities in the church's attitude towards the arts. In the Liturgical Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (§§122–123) it says, »Holy Mother Church has therefore always been the friend of the fine arts and has ever sought their noble help […] The Church has been particularly careful to see that sacred furnishings should worthily and beautiful-

3 Marie-Alain Couturier, To the Great Men, the Great Works [1950], in: Marie-Alain Couturier, Sacred Art, texts selected by Dominique de Menil and Pie Duployé, translated by Granger Ryan, Austin: University of Texas Press/Menil Foundation, 1989, 33–36, here 36 (original emphasis).

4 Couturier, To the Great Men, the Great Works, 36.

ly serve the dignity of worship […] The art of our own days […] shall also be given free scope in the Church, provided that it adorns the sacred buildings and holy rites with due reverence and honor«.[5] Thus, the condition for the friendship of the church is the continued understanding of the role of contemporary art as serving the church and its liturgical practice, as it was in the past. While on the one hand, this understanding is certainly justified and implies great appreciation of the arts as a contribution to the liturgy and pastoral care, on the other hand, the Council does not acknowledge the need for mutuality in true friendship. The statement in the Liturgical Constitution does not recognize that the ›service‹ of the arts amounts to much more than the passive obedience to the expectations and instructions of the church and its representatives, and that sometimes – thank God!, as Couturier says – especially when emancipated from such instructions, the arts open up spaces for an experience that permits the purification of the Christian memory and life of faith, precisely through the liberation from the ecclesial control of the motifs, iconography, and conventions of artistic creation, returning the responsibility to the artists and recipients. According to Gerhard Larcher, this mutuality in the relationship between art and church does not have to lead to the identification of their horizons, a flattening of their respectively unique contribution, but to »a certain convergence in the quest for meaning« in which »the difference of the expectations of meaning of each is reflected«.[6]

Recognizing the competence of the arts to create meaning that cannot be assimilated or even reduced to specific doctrines or church teachings implies acknowledging the impossibility of deducing the aesthetic dimension from other external factors. This means, for example, admitting that the capacity of an altarpiece to move the viewers emotionally cannot be judged according to its subject, as we discussed in previous chapters. This has the twofold consequence of recognizing first, that a religious subject matter is not enough

5 Paul VI., Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html [accessed 2 October 2025].

6 Gerhard Larcher, Annäherungsversuche von Kunst und Glaube: Ein fundamentaltheologisches Skizzenbuch, Wien: LIT Verlag, 2005, 65; in the original: »einer gewissen Konvergenz der Sinnsuche«; »zugleich auch die Andersheit der je eigenen Sinnerwartungen spiegelt«.

to ›guarantee‹ the impact of an artwork on its viewer's interior life and second, that a ›profane‹ artwork can be capable of evoking a religious experience that pulls the viewers outside of themselves and opens up, momentarily at least, a different world for them. This capacity does not depend on the content of an artwork but on the commensurability between the work and the emotional experience it solicits which becomes clear in the eyes of the beholders only when they use their receptive activity with this goal or at least are open to the possibility. Drawing on an expression by literary theorist Earl Wassermann, Charles Taylor speaks of the »subtler languages«[7] that the arts have developed since the Romantic turn and through which they have liberated themselves from the intentionality of subject matters and their assertive, representative function in order to move into a new space where »ontic commitments […] can remain largely unidentified«.[8] But what does this new space of aesthetic experience and the emotions evoked by it mean in relation to the conceptualization and realization of liturgical art?

3. Openness and Contemplation

In trying to answer this question, it is important to take into account the legitimately diverse expectations and preferences of believers whom the artistically created space of the church wants to inspire in their active, communal, and responsible participation in the liturgy and their personal (though also critical) engagement in church and society. In addition, each artistic contribution has to be considered within the context of the church as both the Body of Christ and a material space which, according to the liturgical reform of the Council, represents the qualifying context for the active participation of the *christifideles* as agents in the liturgy which is itself understood as the art of communal celebration. Finally, one has to take into account the perspective of the occasional visitor who enters a church looking for a moment of quiet or meditation without a sustained commitment and participation in the liturgical practices taking place in the building.

7 Charles Taylor, A Secular Age, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 365. Taylor draws on Earl R. Wasserman, The Subtler Language: Critical Readings of Neoclassic and Romantic Poems, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959.

8 Taylor, A Secular Age, 360.

Given these various considerations, we have to ask ourselves if the ambition of liturgical art to evoke such a quest for meaning in its viewers through its aesthetic element might be exaggerated, perhaps even contradictory? How could the »subtler languages« of contemporary art enable this dynamic? And even if it was possible, would one not risk ascribing an excessive power to art that competes with religious experience so that art becomes an »aesthetic church«[9] and religion a fetish, an aestheticized, empty formula without power?[10] Is the price to pay for the valorization of the aesthetic experience of the artwork the devalorization of the liturgical one?

Romano Guardini argues that what a viewer expects from the reception of an artwork is »not only a seeing or hearing, as with the other objects of one's surroundings; nor even a pleasure and amusement, as with something enjoyable. Rather, the artwork opens up a space into which the human being can enter, in which they can breathe, move and interact with the objects and people that have been revealed. But this requires some effort – and thus, at this particular point, the task becomes clear which is as urgent for us today as none other, namely that of contemplation.«[11] Here, Guardini opens up a new perspective in which the tensions between the particularity of the religious-liturgical purpose and the indeterminacy of the aesthetic-artistic dimension are dissolved. He describes the possibilities of experience offered in an artwork as a passage that opens up to an undefined dimension where it is possible to move and breathe freely, as a rupture in the everyday life with its obligations in which seeing and hearing, and even the pleasure we experience in it, are always oriented towards the achievement of a certain goal.

9 The term is Friedrich Hölderlin's, quoted in Horst Schwebel, Die Kunst und das Christentum: Geschichte eines Konflikts, München: C.H. Beck, 2002, 196; in the original: »ästhetische[] Kirche«.

10 Paul Gräb, Kunst und Kirche: Getrennte Wege – Gemeinsame Wege, tà katoptrizòmena: Magazin für Theologie und Ästhetik 9 (2001), https://www.theomag.de/09/pg1.htm [accessed 1 April 2025].

11 Romano Guardini, Über das Wesen des Kunstwerks, Tübingen: Rainer Wunderlich Verlag, 1948, 36; in the original: »nicht nur ein Sehen oder Hören, wie bei den Gegenständen der Umgebung sonst; gar ein Genießen und Sich-Vergnügen, wie bei einer Erfreulichkeit. Das Kunstwerk öffnet vielmehr einen Raum, in welchen der Mensch eintreten, in dem er atmen, sich bewegen und mit den offen gewordenen Dingen und Menschen umgehen kann. Darum muß er sich aber bemühen – und damit wird, an diesem besonderen Punkt, jene Aufgabe deutlich, die für uns Heutige so dringlich ist, wie kaum eine sonst, nämlich die der Kontemplation.«

Even if Guardini does not think specifically about liturgical art, he points to the *possibility* of such openness for the aesthetic-artistic as an opportunity for contemplation. This term can be understood in a broad sense here that is not necessarily religious but denotes a desire to seek meaning and truth about oneself and one's own existence in the world, a quest which is usually absorbed by the demands of everyday life. This confirms what we said above with Larcher about the convergence of art and liturgy which both offer the occasion to disrupt the everyday in the search for meaning that leads to another level of existence.

Guardini speaks of an opening of the experience of being closed in oneself that normally characterizes existence, which is directly proportional to my capacity to abandon myself to the artwork. Withdrawing from the everyday in this way has not only the goal of easing the pressure of obligations and competition by permitting me to briefly catch my breath and take a break. More importantly, it allows me to develop an authentic relationship with myself: the human being who opens up a space for contemplation in the reception of an artwork and enters into it »gains a clearer understanding of themselves; not through theoretical reflection, but in the sense of an immediate elucidation. The heaviness of their own unlived existence lessens. They become more deeply aware of the possibility of becoming themselves real, pure, fulfilled and fully formed.«[12]

Guardini carefully keeps his distance from the perhaps overly confident rhetoric of his time according to which art either is juxtaposed to the ›real‹ world because it evokes a totally different world, or it provides answers to our most existential questions which we are not able to find in turning to our world. In the 20th century, discourses on art underline, on the one hand, that artistic practice and its products are forms of the world and rooted in it, »all the way down to its filth«, as Daniel Sibony notes.[13] On the other hand, the deconstructive impetus and the playful-interactive attitude of contemporary artworks with whom recipients are invited to enter into a game of mutu-

12 Guardini, Über das Wesen des Kunstwerks, 37–38; in the orignal: »wird sich selber deutlicher; nicht theoretisch reflektierend, sondern im Sinne unmittelbarer Aufhellung. Die Schwere des eigenen undurchlebten Vorhandenseins lichtet sich. Er wird tiefer der Möglichkeit inne, selbst echt, rein, erfüllt und ausgeformt zu werden.«

13 Daniel Sibony, Création: Essai sur L'Art contemporain, Paris: Seuil, 2005, 76; in the original: »jusqu'à l'immonde«.

al reflections rather than to explore an intrinsic meaning, contribute to our understanding that the existential ›answers‹ we hope to receive from art lie, to a certain degree, already within us so that the artwork evokes them in us rather than giving form to them. The openness of which Guardini speaks is thus not the passage into a different reality full of significance, leaving the world in its totality behind as meaningless, but it is rather the departure from that part of the world and our lives that are hardened by the necessities and obligations we carry, which, however, given the weight of the everyday, we are used to thinking of and living as the ›whole‹, as if this was all of reality. To be able to leave this oppressive narrowness and reach out towards insights about meaning and truth is grace: at least in the sense that we are not able to do so on our own and find our answers within ourselves but that we need other means that open up this passage for us, moments of disruption like an artwork – and like the liturgy with the buildings and objects that are created for its celebration.

4. Representation and Presence

This recent rediscovery of the kinship between art and liturgy, understood as an opportunity to break down the barrier that everyday life erects around us and that limits our creative, spiritual potentialities, represents something new, perhaps even a rupture in the tradition of religious art. In the past, the Western theory of the image has always moved in a different register than liturgy, focusing especially on the image as representation.[14] Thus, with focus on its signifying function, the religious painting has traditionally been considered as a substitute for the word of God. Paintings, sculptures, and mosaics in churches were attributed a narrative, supportive function. While contemporary theories of the image have moved away from this emphasis on representation, there still remains a continuity between this communicative-didactic register which promotes the knowledge of and affective participation in the content of the faith, and the paradigm that Guardini has described as the opening up of a space of contemplation.[15] But the recognition of this

14 Pierangelo Sequeri, Ritrattazioni del simbolico: Logica dell'essere-performativo e teologia, Assisi: Cittadella, 2012, 40.

15 For example Pierre Piret, L'Art et le Christianisme, Bruxelles: Lessius, 2007.

continuity should not lead us to neglect the significance of these theoretical shifts which have encouraged specific attention to the different dimensions or qualities of communication that art initiates in the situation of reception. The current discussion situates this communication especially in the sensory or material dimension of an artwork, which in the past was often neglected in favor of the interpretation of its meaning.[16] In contrast to the classical paradigm of Western religious art according to which an artwork is primarily a representation, the contemporary aesthetic paradigm sees it primarily as *presence*, as we already discussed in earlier chapters.[17] If it is correct that the distinction between representation and presence (or in other terms, between signified and signifier, between *nomos* and *physis*, between artificial and authentic) is problematic when the terms are rigidly understood as polar opposites, then we need to clarify how else we might understand their connection, because it is decisive for the interpretation of the relationship between art and faith if it is to remain valid today.

In this endeavor, a return to historical experiences in which both paradigms are intuitively understood as collaborative can be helpful. This is the case, for example, in Abbot Suger's (1081–1151) account of his experience when contemplating the precious stones adorning the main altar of the Basilica of St. Denis. He writes: »When – out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God – the loveliness of the many-colored stones has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of heaven.«[18] When Suger contemplates the cross of St. Eligius, covered in precious stones, the meaning of the cross as a religious symbol (which he does not even mention) is less important for his enjoyment – and the profoundness of the experience and reflec-

16 This turn away from the material towards the immaterial meaning represented in it can be more than a vaguely Platonic instinct and become programmatic, for example in the case of the Nazarene movement which placed all emphasis on the content and consciously neglected the technical and material dimension; see Schwebel, Die Kunst und das Christentum, 79.

17 See for example Chapter 2 and 3 in this volume.

18 Sugerius, quoted in Erwin Panofsky, Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History, Garden City: Doubleday, 1955, 129.

tions it motivates – than the light and splendor of the stones which move him affectively to the point that he is pulled beyond the dimension of the everyday with its worldly worries and concerns. Understandably, Suger's account has led Erwin Panofsky to describe this experience as a trance-like state.[19]

Suger tries to capture this state in terms of a religious experience with his reference to the image of the heavenly Jerusalem that Revelation 21,11 describes like this: »It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.« And yet, tellingly, Suger hesitates to directly compare the »strange region of the universe« into which he feels himself drawn in the contemplation of the altar with the purity of heaven. His hesitation suggests that the religious dimension is not identical with the sensory-aesthetic one since the former does not assimilate the latter totally to its own meaning. There remains a gap between the two which reminds us of the newly opened space of which Guardini speaks and which avoids the complete identification of their horizons of which Larcher warns. While Suger's intuition that the two dimensions are not completely identical does not lead him to logically distinguish between the symbolic communication of the religious image and its aesthetic affectivity, the problem is clearly raised given the sensory impression which is experienced as enchantment. To articulate these two levels of experience – the symbolic and the aesthetic – in the tension of their relatedness and distinction is the unavoidable task of the theological-aesthetic reflection on the meaning and role of liturgical art.

Contemporary art contributes to the reconsideration of the connection between the paradigms of representation and presence through the introduction of new and sometimes provocative ways of reinterpreting the traditional religious iconography. These artistic endeavors at transformation and challenge can function, as Larcher writes, as a »prophetic thorn«[20] provoking a »distorting recollection«[21] of the history of salvation as previously expressed in theology and in the liturgical art condoned by ecclesial authorities. The liturgical art commissioned by the church does not even have to actively distance itself from those qualitatively inferior images functioning in the mode of representation which are content to reproduce already assimilated forms of expression, because these artworks are already condemned

19 Panofsky, Meaning in the Visual Arts, 129.

20 Larcher, Annäherungsversuche, 78; in the original: »prophetische[r] Stachel«.

21 Larcher, Annäherungsversuche, 79; »verfremdende[] Erinnerung«.

by their own mediocrity. Couturier writes about a work created with concessions to pastoral or moral criteria external to it that »the work is disqualified after a few years and loses all its power whereas pure relations of colors and lines keep forever the miraculous power of purification, pacification, and exaltation which their authors had not even thought about.«[22] Liturgical art created within the framework provided by church authorities is already far from the idea of an image which might be able to focus the attention and faith of those who are in its presence, because it so closely corresponds to its model and reliably evokes that model through its codes.

The idolatrous tendency of this regulatory mechanism is obvious: when the correspondence of signs with meaning is rendered unambiguous by following traditional and easily recognizable iconographic conventions, one entrusts oneself to a regulated expressivity which does not allow for any surprises, such as the one of being taken into this strange region of the universe that Suger experienced. Even if such an image is aesthetically pleasing, it is still an image created in view of a goal (expressing or representing a certain predetermined idea) that is defined and governed by religion (an institution, its authorities, or its doctrines) without admitting a performative surplus beyond what has already been predetermined. This kind of art is thus unable to lead the recipients into the vertical dimension of divine presence which is – if we can discover it – always where we would not expect it: in the surprising, unnatural, or surreal. In the case of the non-idolatrous material image, presence shifts and oscillates continuously. The image does not ›evoke‹ presence or is its location, but it limits itself to trace its ruptured, contingent texture in the drama of liturgical action, in the flickering brilliance of a precious stone or, as we will see in a moment, in a pixelated stained glass window, a silk thread or a feather, that is, in the unexpected disruption of the forms of a kind of beauty that is simply docile, pleasing, and appeasing.

22 Marie-Alain Couturier, For the Eyes [1950], in: Marie-Alain Couturier, Sacred Art, texts selected by Dominique de Menil and Pie Duployé, translated by Granger Ryan, Austin: University of Texas Press/Menil Foundation, 1989, 14–17, here 16.

5. A Dialogue with Art beyond Interpretation

Gerhard Richter's stained glass window in the Cathedral of Cologne can serve as an example of the inability of traditional religious iconography to create, today, the opportunity for the kind of contemplative seeing – seeing-into and seeing-beyond – that Suger describes, as well as of the impossibility of predicting the religious effect of an artwork – the presence it traces, momentarily and without permanence – in the liturgical space of a church. Faced with the necessity of replacing the windows of the southern transept installed after World War II, the Cathedral Chapter at first considered taking the traditional route and commissioning a work with an explicitly religious subject matter, such as figurative representations of martyrs of the 20th century, corresponding to the iconographic program of the other windows in the cathedral. The correspondence in content was thought to be legitimation enough for the insertion of a contemporary artwork into the centuries-old cathedral and, at the same time, a guarantee of the desired effect of the new window in the sacred space. But when the Chapter chose to commission Richter with the new window, things changed radically. Richter, a non-religious artist who is, however, deeply sensitive to the importance of faith in life and the profound effect of Christianity on European culture and art,[23] could »natürlich« (of course), as he says, not find a form for such a kind of representative work.[24] Instead, Richter left traditional form and content behind altogether and turned toward abstraction, inspired by his work *4096 Farben* (1974) which he used as a model for the window. The result is a window of pure color: small glass squares in 72 colors seamlessly put next to each other and arranged axis-symmetrically according to a computer-generated random pattern (fig. 1). The artist only changed minor details manually in order to avoid figurative associations or to fine-tune the color combinations. The effect is that of a sea of colors which seem to move, oscillate, and interact, and of the window not just providing light in the dark space of the cathedral but also giving it a new vitality (fig. 2).

23 Charlene Spretnak, The Spiritual Dimension in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present, New York: Palgrave, 2014, 134–135.

24 Gerhard Richter, quoted in Luca Di Blasi, Da ist alles drin: Gerhard Richters riesiges Fenster für den Kölner Dom sieht aus wie ein Computerbild, Die Zeit, no. 35, 23 August 2007, http://www.zeit.de/2007/35/Fenster-Richter [accessed 1 April 2025].

Fig. 1: Gerhard Richter, Cologne Cathedral Window (2007), stained glass, 2300 x 900 cm, southern transept of Cologne Cathedral. Photo by Florian Monheim. © Bildarchiv Monheim Baukunst.

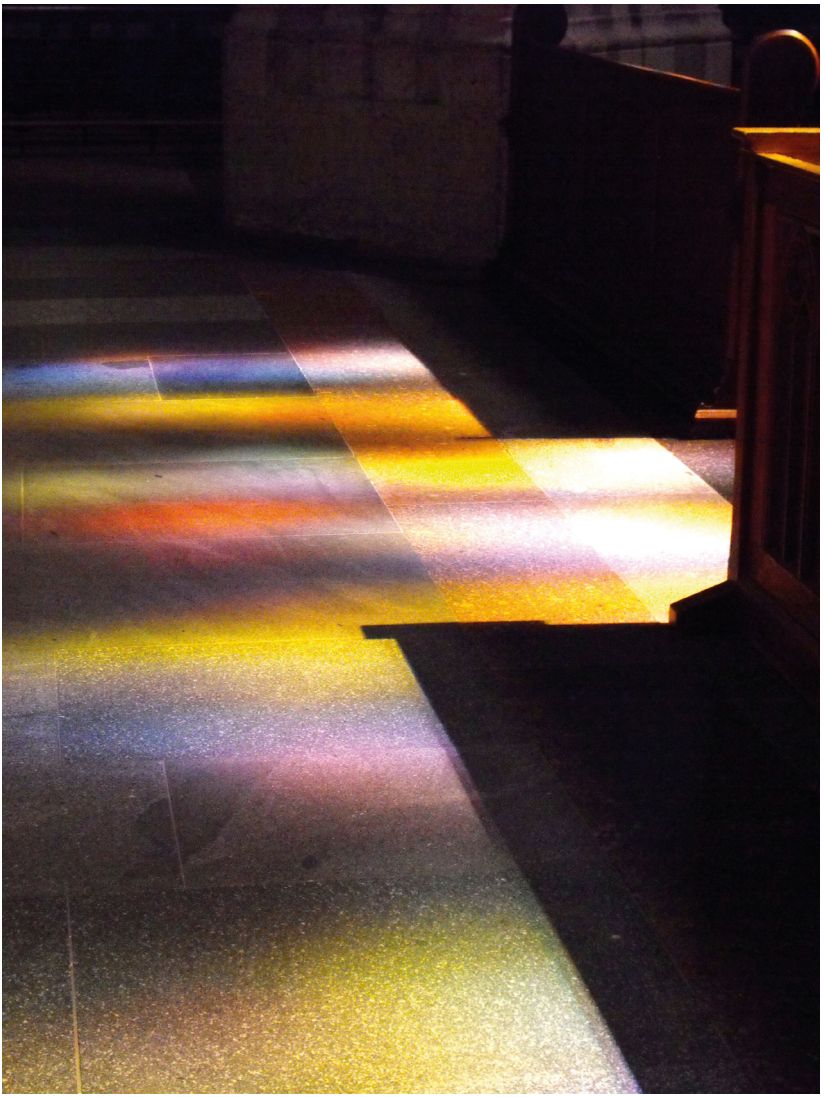

Fig. 2: Reflections of the light shining through Richter's window in Cologne Cathedral.[25]

25 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kölner_Dom_Richter_Fenster.jpg, photo by Geolina13 [accessed 22 February 2026].

Over the course of the development and installation of Richter's window, a polemic developed that reflects the different approaches to liturgical art we have outlined above. The bishop of Cologne at the time, Cardinal Joachim Meisner, reacted critically to the challenge posed by the abstract artwork, of which Werner Spies writes that it is of a »self-confessed profanity [with which] contemporary art has not dared to enter the church for a hundred years«.[26] According to Meisner, the window is not able to express the distinct essence of Christian faith and thus could just as well have been installed in a mosque or any other place.[27] In his opinion, only figurative representations related to traditional iconography are able to give an artwork a Christian (even more specifically, Catholic) identity so that it can truly express the faith which is celebrated in the space where it will be installed. In spite of this critique, the concrete, sensory experience of the presence of the window with its colorful radiance in the cathedral and its reception by the faithful as well as tourists justify the Chapter's risky decision for Richter's window. And with time, even the Cardinal learned to appreciate the presence of the window.[28]

The example of Richter's window in Cologne shows that the conventional criteria for liturgical art (religious content, conventional form and iconography, religious identity of the artist) are not sufficient or, rather, that they have to be verified in the aesthetic experience and the reception of the artwork which define its legitimacy in correspondence to the space in which it is housed. Consequently, the numerous attempts at a symbolic interpretation of Richter's window are not able to fully exhaust its value for the liturgical space because they do not consider this experiential, sensory-spatial-material dimension. The window's similarity with an image made up of digital

26 Werner Spies, Ein Ozean aus Glas im Kölner Dom, Frankfurter Allgemeine, 25 August 2007, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/bilder-und-zeiten-1/gerhard-richters-fenster-ein-ozean-aus-glas-im-koelner-dom-1463774.html [accessed 1 April 2025]; in the original: »bekennenden Profanität[, mit der] sich seit hundert Jahren keine zeitgenössische Kunst mehr in die Kirche getraut [hat]«.

27 Andreas Otto, Als Kardinal Meisner einen Wutausbruch bekam, katholisch.de, 21 August 2007, https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/14454-als-kardinal-meisner-einen-wutausbruch-bekam [accessed 3 April 2025].

28 Besuchermagnet in 72 Farben – Fünf Jahre Richter-Fenster, Die Welt, 22 August 2012, http://www.welt.de/newsticker/news3/article108738302/Besuchermagnet-in-72-Farben-Fuenf-Jahre-Richter-Fenster.html [accessed 1 April 2025].

pixels has been interpreted in relation to the apparently contemporary desire to live in a digital reality.[29] Others read the play of colors as a reference to Genesis and the multiple possibilities of creation,[30] the multi-colored light as divine light,[31] and the infinite interactions between the colors as a critique of »preferences and […] exclusion«, as the »rejection of taste and dogmatism«.[32]

Such interpretations are certainly plausible to some degree given the cultural references which they associate and yet, though they may function on an academic level, so to say, they are not sufficient to establish the value of the artwork for and in the liturgical space. What counts in that particular space is the artwork's capacity to evoke an interior attitude and a renewed spiritual attention to the senses and their perception which can be found even in those whose interpretations focus on the window's symbolism when they speak of the glow and nearly aggressive effect of the colors.[33] Couturier also notes: »[w]e must insist that in art it is not the intellect that judges and discriminates, it is the senses – or, to put it more precisely, the intuition of the senses and not the exercise of reason. In matters of art one judges not by what one thinks but by what one feels. In other words, by what one is.«[34] The experience of the windows is one of seeing – and at the same time of the impossibility of seeing as we understand it in the context of everyday life, that is, as the seeing of *something*. The oscillating colors, impossible to grasp and fix, preclude objective and defining forms of seeing and result in a kind of subjective seeing that contemplates itself, or as Spies writes: »We see seeing.«[35] This kind of seeing is potentially open to the religious because it is freed from the instrumentalizing grasp of reality which focuses on the surface of what we see. Instead, contemplative seeing is a seeing into the depth of reality until, perhaps, we see the Other within and beyond it.

29 Di Blasi, Da ist alles drin.

30 Spies, Ozean, speaks of a »Parabel der Genesis« [parable of Genesis].

31 Werner Rügemer references this interpretation in his critical take on the Richter windows, Göttliches Licht und kapitalistischer Realismus, Neue Rheinische Zeitung, 19 September 2007, http://www.nrhz.de/flyer/beitrag.php?id=11471&css=print [accessed 3 April 2025].

32 Spies, Ozean; in the original: »Vorlieben und […] Ausschluss«; »Ablehnung von Geschmack und Rechthaberei«

33 Spies, Ozean.

34 Couturier, For the Eyes, 14.

35 Spies, Ozean; in the original: »Wir sehen dem Sehen zu.«

This rupture of ordinary, objectifying, and functional seeing which opens a space for a new kind of seeing, a new and different seeing of ourselves and our world, is accompanied by a new perception of the space in which we find ourselves and of that which happens in it – the cathedral and the liturgy. For the window does not appear in a vacuum; we perceive it in a particular space and at a particular time. The architecture of the window and the cathedral, spatial relationships, the form and colors of the other windows, surfaces, lines, lights – all this influences perception and reception, just like weather conditions, the altitude of the sun, and the position of the viewer. This aesthetic experience of seeing, open for a religious dimension because it is another kind of seeing, perhaps even the seeing of the Other, is situated in specific spatio-temporal coordinates and thus unique, unrepeatable, and personal. And it could not be any different if the aesthetic experience is supposed to open a new space for the viewer. Thus, the experience is extremely subjective, yet not completely relative. For even if the window does not reference the tradition of religious art in form and content and does not represent the history of the Christian community in a narrative, didactic fashion and thus does not serve any extraneous purposes,[36] it is still a part of this history because of its situatedness in the space of the cathedral, and in the moment of our perception of the artwork in its autonomy, we as viewers – even if we enter the cathedral as tourists – also participate in this history, just as do other people who share this space with us and the community of all those who have entered the cathedral before us or will yet do so. The autonomy of the artwork is not violated through any kind of direct instrumentalization for the purposes of mission or teaching, but it relates to this particular liturgical space with its aesthetic, historical, and religious significance in the free mutuality of true friendship of which we talked above. In the case of the Richter window, it is therefore possible to speak with Luca di Blasi of an extraordinary proximity between art and church[37] in which neither of the two diminishes the value or autonomy of the other but enriches it with new possibilities – the aesthetic quality of faith, or the depth of seeing in the artwork, or whatever surprises the encounter with the window may hold for a viewer – that emerge from their mutual relationship.

36 Schwebel, Die Kunst und das Christentum, 128.

37 Di Blasi, Da ist alles drin.

The Richter window is an example for the still relatively rare and risky case of an artwork that is not beholden to the criteria set by its commissioners or by the expectation to serve a purpose external to itself. As a permanent part of the liturgical space, it contributes to the creation of this space as sacred and to the actions performed there through the evocation of a particular atmosphere, attitude, and openness in the experience of a new kind of contemplative seeing. More frequent, and less problematic, is the temporary exhibition of an artwork in a church. The provisional character of the exhibition allows for greater freedom to experiment, even for calculated experiences of shock and irritation, because even if the community is not able to relate with the work, it just takes a bit of patience and everything will be as before. When exhibited temporarily, the work can also be integrated more intentionally into the liturgy and thus a more direct interaction between art and liturgy is possible that could not be sustained over a longer period of time without losing its effect.

An interesting example for such a temporary interaction between autonomous art and church is the intervention *W Erde Licht* by Elke Maier and Georg Planer in the Cathedral of Klagenfurt during Lent 2009. Nine female and male figures, sculpted by Georg Planer from soil, were positioned in the central aisle of the cathedral, lying on their back, arms along the body, legs closed and stretched long, reminding by their posture of the funerary sculptures of the Late Middle Ages. Using a multitude of fine threads, Elke Maier connected the figures with the cathedral ceiling which shows a representation of the risen Christ in its center (fig. 3). During the intervention, the figures were subject to natural changes, as the crumbly, unfired soil they were made from began to shift. But in conscious interaction with the liturgy of Lent and Holy Week, the artists added further transformations to the intervention: up until Palm Sunday, soil was added around and between the figures, and in the night from Holy Friday to Holy Saturday, this ›tomb‹ was covered in white marble sand. The resurrection of Easter Sunday was symbolized by a cloud of white feathers fastened on thin threads in the space above the figures (fig. 4).

Fig. 3: Elke Maier/Georg Planer, *W Erde Licht* (2009), very fine white silk yarn, white geese and duck feathers, white marble sand, soil, installation Klagenfurt Cathedral. Photo © F. Neumüller; artwork © Elke Maier & Georg Planer.

Fig. 4: Elke Maier/Georg Planer, *W Erde Licht* (2009) in its Easter transformation. Photo © F. Neumüller; artwork © Elke Maier & Georg Planer.

Different from Richter's window, the installation by Maier and Planer reacts directly to the liturgy of Lent and Holy Week, participating in it and adding a new concreteness and materiality to that which the liturgy remembers and celebrates: the death of Jesus Christ, the passing of the incarnated logos in his materiality (»You are dust, and to dust you shall return«, Gen 3,19), the darkness of Holy Saturday when all hope is extinguished and God appears absent – and then the legerity, life, and light of Easter Sunday. The dialectic of art vs. liturgy or images vs. text that so often strains the discussion about contemporary art in the church[38] is here resolved in a new perspective. Art does not claim to replace liturgy or kerygma but enters into a relationship with them and enriches them, while each retains its specificity. In the case of *W Erde Licht* (the title is a word play on ›become light‹ and ›soil – light‹) this happens through emphasizing the anthropological dimension of the liturgy of Lent and Easter: the intervention relates to the event of the death and

38 See for example Schwebel, Die Kunst.

resurrection of Jesus Christ and interprets it so that it can be experienced by viewers through the reflection on the existential tension within the human being between the materiality of the body and the infinity of human desire, between earth and heaven, the fact of mortality and the hope of (eternal) life.

But as with the Richter window, the content and interpretation of Maier's and Planer's intervention cannot exhaust the work. Instead, it fully unfolds only in the experience of its aesthetic dimensions in which light and space play, again, a decisive role. Connected with the space of the church through the fine threads, the figures become a part of its architecture, iconographic program, and history, which the artwork both references and recreates. Similar to other interventions by Maier in Graz (2003), Innsbruck (2005) or Salzburg (2010), the threads are materially connected to the concrete space, yet also change it so that it can be perceived and experienced in a new way.[39] The contrast between the subtlety of the fine threads, the fragility of the feathers, the massive materiality of the cathedral, and the figures made from soil seems to undo space and materiality so that the figures float in space without losing their material groundedness. The work cannot be conclusively grasped in its totality because the light reflected on the threads changes and recreates it continuously, as do the transformation of the materials and the artists' conscious interventions. Although light and threads make each other visible in a certain sense, their visibility is momentary, indirect, and transitory. In fact, without light, the thin threads would be too fine to see, and without the threads as a reflective surface, light would be invisible. Thus the visible is also connected with the invisible, which can yet be experienced.[40] As in the contemplative seeing-of-seeing of Richter's windows, the seeing subject cannot fully grasp what they see and make it their own but, following the traces appearing among the changes, has to accept that what they believe they see is being withdrawn from their sight, again and again. Perhaps even more than in Richter's window, the kind of seeing solicited by Mai-

39 This new vision of space is important for many interventions in churches. For a discussion of several examples see Johannes Rauchenberger/Alois Kölbl, Locus Iste: Raum und Rührung, in: Christian Wessely (ed.), Kunst des Glaubens – Glaube der Kunst: Der Blick auf das ›unverfügbare Andere‹, Regensburg: Pustet, 2006, 248–262.

40 This issue is important for the artist Elke Maier in other works as well; see Elisabeth Steiner, ›Ich bin eine Lebenssammlerin‹, der Standard, 2 September 2009, http://diestandard.at/1250691841218/Ich-bin-eine-Lebenssammlerin [accessed 1 April 2025].

er and Planer's work is not just subjective and contemplative but includes other senses as well: not only in the sense that meaning withdraws and the possible ›senses‹ of the installation multiply, but also in the sense that seeing the subtle threads, the rough soil, the fine marble dust, the weight of the figures, and the lightness of the feathers addresses also other senses and thus involves the viewer's whole sensory being in the process of meaning making. This attention to the synesthesia of perception can also help overcome the contrast between art (the sphere of the visible) and word (the sphere of the audible),[41] precisely because each of these spheres is not closed in itself and isolated but interacts with the other in making possible an experience that involves a person's total existence.

6. To Conclude: Opening the Space for Contemplative Seeing

Departing from a more general discussion about liturgical art and through the analysis of two specific examples, we propose a possibility of overcoming the deadlock in the discussion about liturgical art, which returns again and again to the same factors (the content of the work, the artist's faith, etc.), by focusing on its reception, and in particular the experiential dimension of reception, in the space of the church and the liturgy celebrated in it.[42] In 1965, Otto Stelzer wrote about the possibility of ›sacred‹ contemporary art: »The question is not what such creations *mean* but what they *effect*.«[43] This does not mean that form and content are unrelated and irrelevant, because they obviously have a decisive influence on reception. But it is more important to shift attention from the work and its creator to its reception in its spa-

41 See e. g. Schwebel, Die Kunst, 221.

42 As Horst Schwebel notes, this requires closer theological reflection of perception and certainly also empirical studies of concrete reception experiences of artworks in the space of churches; Horst Schwebel, Kunst im Kontext Kirche: Positionen – Anti-Positionen – Praktische Folgerungen, tà katoptrizòmena: Magazin für Theologie und Ästhetik 46 (2007), https://www.theomag.de/46/hs6.htm [accessed 1 April 2025].

43 Otto Stelzer, Kann moderne Kunst sakral sein?, Die Zeit, 12 February 1965, http://www.zeit.de/1965/07/kann-moderne-kunst-sakral-sein [accessed 1 April 2025] (our emphasis); in the original: »Die Frage ist nicht, was solche Gestaltungen bedeuten, sondern was sie bewirken.«

tio-temporal context, the recipients and their background, and the ways in which the artwork is experienced. Such an experience cannot be planned; it is a gift, like a moment of grace when external conditions and internal attitudes coincide, when work and recipient enter into a play of interactions. A catalogue of objectifiable criteria for the evaluation of the relationship of a work to the space of the church cannot guarantee that such a moment of grace happens and that the work is able to enter into a relationship with the liturgical space of which it is a part, with the community that gathers there in order to celebrate their faith, and with those who, without confessing any faith, enter the church to find a moment of stillness or beauty. This web of multiple relationships between artwork and context has to be taken into account not only when someone tries to limit liturgical art to conventional content and form but also when someone attempts to introduce the challenging art of the avantgarde into the space of a church. This became clear when Georg Baselitz gave his *Tanz ums Kreuz* (1983), an inverted crucifix, to a small rural community,[44] where despite its undeniable quality as an artwork, the demanding, dominant work was – given the limited space and the needs of the celebrating community – unable to enter into a fruitful relationship with its context so that eventually it had to be removed and returned to the artist.

The decisive role of the context is also the reason why the reception of an artwork in the liturgical space can be so different from the reception experience in a museum: not everything is dependent on the viewer's subjectivity. Reception can and must be understood as an existential moment which integrates the whole person in past, present, and future by addressing all senses and the whole being of the individual. Yet it is not shaped by absolute subjectivity but by subjectivity-in-relation: in a mutually constitutive relation to the space of the church, to the actions performed there, the words spoken there, the faith that motivated its construction, and the history it has experienced, including the varying, even profane uses of the liturgical space. However, context is not defined by space only – important as it is – but also includes the community and the persons who have visited this space or will visit it, by what they believe, hope for, love, their doubts and discouragement. Their presence, movement, and practice co-create the space and thus

44 Schwebel, Die Kunst, 191–192.

enter into the complex web of constitutive relationships which all shape the moment of reception and aesthetic experience. Even if contemporary liturgical art does not reproduce the forms and contents of the tradition, the artwork is still part of this tradition shaping Christian identity because of its relationship with space which it does not passively sustain simply because this is where it has been put but in whose creation it also participates. While Michel de Certeau has focused on movement and walking as a practice that constitutes spaces, which he contrasts with seeing as a totalizing practice,[45] the artworks discussed here as well as Suger's testimony also point towards the importance of seeing – understood and experienced as an unstable, precarious relationship or process, contemplative and not totalizing or instrumentalizing – in creating spaces of openness and freedom.

This brings us back once more to Guardini with whom it is possible to understand this aesthetic experience, which is not an alternative to the liturgy but in continuity and in a kind of kinship with it, as we said above, as the opening of a space of freedom.[46] The examples of Richter and Maier/Planer have contributed to qualifying this freedom as one of contemplative seeing, as Guardini said, and even more, one of indirect and uncertain seeing. In the splendor of Richter's window what is observed dissolves in the oscillating light of the small colored pixels, while Maier and Planer's work makes visible a double paradox: that of the heavy bodies floating in space and that of the thin threads and light which are invisible on their own and become visible only in their interaction. Without necessarily attributing a symbolic meaning to the light as divine light, the fact remains that in both cases, light makes seeing possible and yet at the same time impossible because it continuously changes what is seen. The experience of contemplative seeing which the works enable is characterized by instability and uncertainty and thus implies a tension towards the future – a future in which, as we hope, we will see clearly what now we only see darkly.

45 See Marian Füssel's discussion of de Certeau's theory of space, Tote Orte und gelebte Räume: Zur Raumtheorie von Michel de Certeau S.J., Historical Social Research 38.3 (2013), 22–39, here 33–34.

46 This point is further developed in Chapter 7 of this volume.

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Chapter 7
Street Art as Sacred Space
Heterotopia, Play, and Expansive Imagination

Davide Zordan and Stefanie Knauss

1. Space beyond the Binary

In this chapter, we will continue our reflections on the space of the sacred and how visual arts contribute to or inhibit its constitution as sacred, moving between the institutionally defined sacred space of the church and urban, apparently secular or profane spaces. In the map of Rome by Giambattista Nolli (1748), churches as institutionalized ›sacred spaces‹ were marked as buildings but with an empty, white interior – signifying their conceptual position between the white of public space, like streets or squares, and the solid filled-in space of private buildings; and thus, they represent for Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter, drawing on Foucault's notion of heterotopia, a third beyond the public/private binary.[1] However, in this chapter, we think about the space of the sacred as transcending the binary of the religious and the secular, created in the disruption of the norms and conventions that uphold their separation. We investigate where this space can be found, and what the conditions are that make it a space in which it is possible to imagine and experience – sensorially and affectively – a relationship of faith. Drawing on theories of space developed in multiple disciplines and engaging the cine-

1 Michiel Dehaene/Lieven De Cauter, Introduction: Heterotopia in a Postcivil Society, in: Michiel Dehaene/Lieven De Cauter (ed.), Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society, London: Routledge, 2008, 1–9, 1 and 6.

matic spaces of Andrei Tarkovsky and Ulrich Seidl, we argue that the privileged space of the sacred, in which religious experience – broadly understood as a disruption of the everyday, a moment of existential reflection or of being drawn beyond oneself towards the other or the transcendent – is possible, is the heterotopic, liminal space of the margin or the crossroads in which the norms and conventions that stabilize the center are disrupted and open up for something new. We then show that the ephemeral space of liminality and transgression created through street art can become such a space in which it is possible to freely and creatively imagine ourselves, our communities, and our relationship with God.

Visuality, and the arts in particular, contribute to the establishment, significance, and experience of space in multiple ways: they can make space for our imagination, but they can also close it down. The Italian writer Luigi Meneghello describes his childhood experiences of the visual arts in a church in the countryside of the region of Veneto as delimiting his imagination of the sacred: »Here in the village, when I was a boy, there was a God who lived in the church, in the immense space above the high altar where in fact one often saw his proud portrait up overhead between the rays of gilded wood. He was old but very fit (certainly less old than Saint Joseph) and very severe; but incredibly capable and for that they called him omniscient, and in fact he knew everything and, worse, saw everything.«[2] The aspect that for our context is the most interesting in Meneghello's memories of the God of his childhood church is the connection he establishes between the image of God and the space above the altar where it is located and offered to the gaze of the faithful. In spite of the vastness of space (»the immense space«), the image of God is very specific and clearly determined by iconographic and theological conventions: it is the traditional image of an old, angry, White man, and, given the iconographic tradition, we can imagine that he also had a white beard. There seems to be a contradiction between the vastness that the church holds in itself and the limits that it imposes on the divine image

2 Luigi Meneghello, Libera nos a malo [1963], Milano: Rizzoli, 1975, 7; in the original: »Qui in paese quando ero bambino c'era un Dio che abitava in chiesa, negli spazi immensi sopra l'altar maggiore dove si vedeva infatti spesso in alto un suo fiero ritratto tra i raggi di legno dorato. Era vecchio ma molto in gamba (certo meno vecchio di San Giuseppe) e severissimo; ma incredibilmente capace e per questo lo chiamavano onnisciente, e infatti sapeva tutto e, peggio, vedeva tutto.«

and thus on our imagination of the divine. Does the space define how the image is perceived? Or is it vice versa? Is there a connection between space and image at all, and what is it like?

In order to pursue these questions, it is important to keep in mind that an image is not a simple object that we look at but rather the outcome of a complex interaction between the material image (a man with beard, painted with specific materials on a particular foundation), our mental images (ideas we have about God, both subjective and socially or theologically constructed), and our embodied gaze through which these various mental and material images are put into relationship.[3] Although Meneghello's church seems to offer an immense space in which imagination and image can freely relate – the space above the altar is perceived as vast and limitless – our imagination is nevertheless limited by traditions and conventions so that in the end, all we can come up with in that limitless space is the old image of a White man with a beard. How could that happen in those vast spaces?

Of course, we might be critical, or even suspicious, of Meneghello's vision as a child of an old, angry, all-seeing God – after all, we think we know that God is beyond any images we can imagine. And yet Meneghello's reminiscences are a good example of how an image is produced in a series of perhaps unconscious perceptions and reflections (especially in a small boy and his memories) within a particular context, a given cultural and religious space, and in their impact on our imagination. Jean Piaget notes that the child develops the perception of time and experience through the perception of space.[4] This primary awareness of inhabiting a space with their body, the experience of above and below, left and right, is thus the place from which children begin to discover the world, filled with surprise, wonder, and amazement. Spatiality is not only at the beginning of experience but it is also the start of going *beyond* immediate perceptions: even the expression ›to go beyond‹ implies spatiality. Space and imagination, perception and signification are thus intricately connected.

Susanne Langer's reflections on architecture can help to better understand the relationship between space, imagination, and meaning. Accord-

3 Hans Belting, Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft, München: Fink, 2001.

4 Jean Piaget, Le développement de la notion de temps chez l'enfant, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946, 95–96.

ing to Langer, the primary symbolization of architectural space is the »ethnic domain«,[5] that is, the tangible, sensible space that can be perceived and that is created in the interaction with cultures and people. When »[t]he architect creates its [a culture's] image«,[6] culture does not impose its image on persons but instead allows the image to be activated by and in the people who move in the space in order to perceive ›something‹ in its perceptible vastness. These are images and schemata that present themselves vaguely and are not clearly defined, as »the alternations of sleep and waking, venture and safety, emotion and calm, austerity and abandon«.[7] As Langer writes, all artistic genres follow »the logic of non-discursive form«[8] and consequently invite non-discursive, affective encounter and feeling: form »*expresses* life – feeling, growth, movement, emotion, and everything that characterizes vital existence.«[9]

Following Langer's view of the openness of the images present in space, to be introduced into the space of the church does not mean to be anxiously guided towards a well-defined, discursive religious and cultural knowledge, as it happened with Meneghello and the eurocentric, patriarchal idea of God. Instead, entering this space means to *perceive*, sensorially and affectively, what calls out to me from this space and inspires me. If architectural space is to be considered ›sacred‹, it cannot persuade or impose itself with certain predefined ideas or images in any ordinary way, but, instead, it allows the subject to be, to breathe, and to enter into a space that is hospitable and welcoming, oscillating, as Langer says, between dream and waking, between being and becoming. In this kind of space, it is possible to freely interact with what I see, even if it is the old image of the angry, White man with the beard, and I can play with the image, take it to be God, or perhaps Saint Joseph, or somebody else, think about their relative fitness and age. Here, the space that surrounds me functions as mediation between what is and what might be, in interaction with my own being in the space, inhabiting and perceiving it.

5 Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, 95.

6 Langer, Feeling and Form, 96.

7 Langer, Feeling and Form, 96.

8 Langer, Feeling and Form, 103.

9 Langer, Feeling and Form, 82 (original emphasis).

But not all the traditional spaces of the church have provided this space of free encounter to believers. The precise specifications for the construction of churches established in the wake of the Council of Trent, and the Baroque architecture developed at the time, translate the image of a triumphalist church into architecture and aim at filling all available space in order to confine the believers in a »liturgical immobility«,[10] limiting their imagination so as to align it with the ›official‹ Catholic imagination rather than offering a space to play and to imagine anew and differently. In fact, the intention of this kind of architectural space was precisely to protect the Catholic faith from any individual imaginative engagement which the Counter-reformation feared would lead to heresy, as the Reformation had shown. Instead of freely and playfully perceiving or sensing faith in space, according to the Counter-reformation logic, faith was to be guided and represented according to the parameters defined by the church both as an institution and as a space. But when space is only used to confine the sacred as well as the individual, there is no possibility for the subject's free interaction with the sacred in space. Not only does the spatial confinement of the sacred in the prescriptiveness of architecture and images inhibit the individual engagement with faith – the possibility for it to touch my existence in its deepest dimensions and become ›my own‹ – but it also delimits the ever-greater reality of God, and thus this spatial and imaginative limitation should be considered the real ›heresy‹.

Something similar to what was intended by Baroque architecture is still present in the churches of the 21st century, as becomes visible in Ulrich Seidl's documentary *Jesus, You Know* (*Jesus, du weißt*, AU 2003). For this film, the director invited believers to pray in front of the camera in a voluntary performance of prayer in the churches they usually go to – although certainly distorted to some degree by the presence of the director and his camera – arranging the prayer sequences like beads on a rosary, one after the other. In his framing of each praying individual, Seidl underlines the severe geometry of the churches, with empty rows of pews, series of columns, and other architectural elements that repeat themselves in a mechanical form similar to the prayers. The restrictive effect of the church architecture is reinforced

10 Roberto Tagliaferri, Saggi di architettura e di iconografia dello spazio sacro, Padova: Messaggero, 2011, 128; in the original: »immobilismo liturgico«.

by the static camera positioned in front of the praying individual, confining them in the frame: both cinematic space and architectural space appear as a prison in which the religious imagination of relationship with the divine is contained. The emphasis on the geometry of the space and the frame of the film image raises the issue discussed above with even greater urgency: does the ›sacred space‹ that surrounds me evoke and nourish my prayer as a free expression of my relationship with God, or does it enforce a rigid, repetitive formula of prayer, as Seidl's film suggests? As the director shows, the filmic apparatus invades less into the freedom of the protagonists to express themselves in their prayers than the architectural space in which they find themselves. The sacred space shown in Seidl's film is a space that protects by closing itself against the threats posed by the world outside, an image of the church as a fortress as it was imagined during the late 19th century in the face of the perceived threat of modernity. But if the church is a fortress, its protective enclosure also delimits the believers' freedom to relate with God. Here, the space that the faithful inhabit is not so much »an illusion, begotten by the visible expression of a feeling«,[11] as Langer says, but a space circumscribed by a material as well as theological boundary which defines the sacred primarily in spatial terms: inside and outside, center and margin, sacred and profane.

This echoes Mircea Eliade's argument that the spatial definition of the sacred helps to keep at bay the chaotic, hybrid relativities of profane space and to identify a center from which to encounter the world: the sacred.[12] Seidl's way of filming underlines this idea: hunched over in the center of the image, within the rigid confines of the frame, the persons who pray have a clear focal point, in Eliade's words, a »center [that] is equivalent to the creation of the world«.[13] But although reassuring in its stability, the center is also obstructive: the space of the believers is not one in which to move and relate freely; instead, it creates a trench that separates them from the world, and, paradoxically, from the sacred or divine itself.

In contrast to Eliade, we argue that the space of the sacred is not the center – static, defined, and focused – but rather the crossroads or the margin,

11 Langer, Feeling and Form, 99.

12 Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, translated by Willard R. Trask, New York: Harvest Book, 1959, 22.

13 Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, 22.

a space without place, dynamic and undefined, which does not belong to us but in which we are welcome as guests, like the space created through street art discussed below. It is a space that does not define or circumscribe but nevertheless shelters us – not in the sense of ›my home is my castle‹, in the separation from the outside that stifles us inside with an immobilizing familiarity and expectations of who we are and how our relationships should be organized. Instead, in the space we are imagining through the visual arts we engage with here, we can be who we are and, even, who we will become.

This view of the space of the sacred can be further developed in conversation with Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault. Heidegger understands *Dasein* as *Geworfenheit*, being projected into the world which we inhabit and cultivate as our home, also through our embodied interaction with it, but within which we are not *at* home.[14] Being in the world presupposes spatiality, and the space of the world is thus a part of our imagination, meditation, and prayer. But this space does not rigidly dictate the conditions for these activities; instead, it prepares us for them through the foundational importance of spatiality in the development and practice of all human perception and imagination, as Jean Piaget says. And that is why we call it ›sacred space‹.

This understanding of the space of the sacred as constituted through dynamic relationships rather than a fixed location and boundary echoes Foucault's notion of ›heterotopia‹.[15] Although a notoriously ambiguous and hard-to-define concept taken into different directions by later theorists, heterotopia allows us to think space beyond the binaries of public/private, material/immaterial, sacred/profane. Heterotopias are ›real‹ spaces but, as Foucault writes, they »are outside of all places, even though they are actually localizable«.[16] They may contain incompatible spaces or multiple times, be both enclosed and open, limited and penetrable.[17] Especially in the postmodern development of Foucault's ideas, the openness of heterotopias has been emphasized, recognizing them as spaces of inclusiveness and connection that are often found at the margins of society or in the undeveloped and

14 Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927, 176.

15 Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces [1967], translated by Lieven De Cauter and Michiel Dehaene, in: Michiel Dehaene/Lieven De Cauter (ed.), Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society, London: Routledge, 2008, 13–29.

16 Foucault, Of Other Spaces, 17.

17 Foucault, Of Other Spaces, 19–21.

liminal areas of urban spaces, established through relationships and practices that may empower marginalized groups through their counter-hegemonic or imaginative way of relating to a given space.[18] Dehaene and De Cauter describe heterotopias as spaces that »inject alterity into sameness«.[19] They see play as the activity typical of heterotopias that creates its own space and time, requires and enacts freedom and openness.[20] Like the space of play, heterotopias are usually temporary and fragile, constituted through practices and relationships. Yet, in their fragility, they can nevertheless be protective and sheltering, like Heidegger's home that is not stifling but a safe haven[21] for those who do not find their own place elsewhere and can be(come) who they are in the playful relationality among space and other beings in heterotopia.

In order to be experienced as a space of the sacred in this play of openness and shelter, the space of the church needs to be opened up and liberated from boundaries. An example for such a (de-)construction of sacred space – according to the logics of cinema and not of architecture – can be found in Tarkovsky's films. For him, the church is a space that does not delimit but where the walls as the boundaries between inside and outside are ruptured so that the light can enter and people freely move. In a poetic dream image in the final sequence of *Nostalghia* (IT/SU 1983), the protagonist Andrei Gorchakov is shown in his home, a Russian datcha in the middle of fields, when a slow zoom-out reveals that the datcha is in fact placed in the protective space of an immense cathedral in ruins, with snowflakes falling through the cracks in the ceiling and covering him up. Here, the church is an enclosure, but it is also openness; it seems to breathe, like the Tuscan cathedrals shown in other scenes of the film, and to flow, like the water that flows through the church in ruins here and that is also an important motif elsewhere in the film. A similar sense of an open, undefined, and heterotopic space is evoked in Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev* (SU 1973) and in the works of the homonymous painter shown there. After the war and

18 Hilde Heynen, Heterotopia Unfolded?, in: Michiel Dehaene/Lieven De Cauter (ed.), Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society, London: Routledge, 2008, 311–323, here 317.

19 Dehaene/De Cauter, Introduction, 4.

20 Lieven De Cauter/Michiel Dehaene, The Space of Play: Towards a General Theory of Heterotopia, in: Michiel Dehaene/Lieven De Cauter (ed.), Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society, London: Routledge, 2008, 87–102, here 95–96.

21 De Cauter/Dehaene, The Space of Play, 97.

destruction waged by the Tartars, the disconsolate Rublev meets with Theophanes the Greek, who restores his faith in a conversation that takes place in a destroyed church. Both dialogue and space are constitutive of what happens here because, again, the destruction of material, built space is imagined as a possibility for openness, fresh air, and new creation. Again, snowflakes are falling, this time to cover the ashes of the wars, and the breaches in the church building are open like passages, like a prayer that is waiting to be said.

This openness of the architectural and imaginative space of the church permits Tarkovsky to initiate a conversation about what one might feel and hope, and hope to find in one's faith. Water and snow are for Tarkovsky like divine grace that enters into and suffuses the sacred space. Thus, the sacredness of the space lies not in its differentiation and separation from the rest of the world, as Eliade proposes, but rather in that which opens up a rupture or a passage, a current that cannot be blocked. The space that admits the sacred is the presence of something that is emptied out, that flows, it is a bridging point, a passageway. This space makes it possible to find an indication or directionality that invites the persons within that space in their embodied situation and with their feelings towards that which attracts them and allows them to find rest, to inhabit the space, and to play in it – in a liminal and momentary way, not in the sense of settling into one's home-castle, closed off from the others.

As Langer writes, architecture suggests to those who live in it and adapt to it, an »*imagined feeling*«,[22] not just of the form itself but in all that offers itself and moves in that space. One might discover a parallel between this understanding of space and the meaning of the liturgy.[23] Architectural space is like a resonant cavity for the liturgical play, its words and gestures. The ritual practice and its relationships structure the space and offer a language for our spatial sensibility. Consequently, the architecture of sacred spaces has to keep in mind the performative dynamics of this particular space: it is a space that I do not simply perceive at a distance but in which I live and breathe, that confronts me and, even more, that asks me to confront myself. Thus, the architecture of churches cannot limit itself to functional necessities but has to provide the vastness and airiness that makes space for God's

22 Langer, Feeling and Form, 177 (original emphasis).

23 Klemens Richter, Kirchenräume und Kirchenträume: Die Bedeutung des Kirchenraums für eine lebendige Gemeinde, Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1998.

gratuitous grace and the imaginative character of the liturgy, which Romano Guardini describes as playing before God.[24]

To understand the liturgy as play is not a banalization of liturgical practice. On the contrary, and perhaps paradoxically, play is a serious matter that demands commitment in order to work and that involves the player's complete existence, and thus a heterotopic space is needed that provides space for this serious play and that allows itself to be constituted and reshaped through the imaginative creativity of play, as mentioned above. Thus, space, when it allows the experience of the sacred, is useless and without instrumental purpose, like liturgical furniture or accessories can appear useless or even utopian. There is nothing functional or efficient about the ritual actions that would give any reason to the architectural space; instead, the liturgical space is all about the imagination and disposition to play, that is, the liturgy. According to the liturgist Louis Bouyer, the canonical form of church architecture has no other norm than the celebration of the liturgy.[25] Only the space precedes and determines the sacred in the sense that it permits the realization of the encounter of human beings in their spatio-temporal existence with the sacred, not as a limitation but as an opening. This is serious play, indeed.

These thoughts about the sacred space as a heterotopic space without a predefined function or meaning, porous and inviting of imaginative play, might be disconcerting for those who could suspect behind this view a defense of pure form or even a de-mythification or delegitimation of the sacred space as it becomes a sacred void. But in fact, the sacred space has to open up in order to become a space of involvement and connection, just like the flowing water or the snow that falls into the ruins in Tarkovsky's films. The church as a fortress, as it is represented in Seidl's documentary, might offer protection, but it also shuts in the persons who enter it. It is protection without playfulness and thus without room to breathe or feel. Sacred space is created in imagination, play, and relationship; it is not *a priori* present in an ontological sense. It is ›there‹ but only in the sense of a promise, a possibility. The space of the sacred is thus like the construction of the void that is not simply empty in the sense of a subtraction or negativity but in the

24 Romano Guardini, Vom Geist der Liturgie, 6th ed., Freiburg: Herder, 1962.

25 Louis Bouyer, Architecture et liturgie, Paris: Cerf, 1967.

sense of offering space and possibilities for connections, relationships, and the free emergence of meaning. Invited to enter the space of the sacred, we are situated at the threshold between inside and outside, in a position that questions us and challenges us to be involved, to learn to inhabit this space, to play and to pray, and, in doing so, to assume the responsibility for realizing the promise of this space.

2. Sacred Play in the Streets

In this second part of the chapter, we turn to the analysis of how street art can be a part of the creation of a heterotopic space in which the vastness of space is not confined by norms and conventions but instead opened up for freedom, playfulness, and creativity so that it can become a space in which a new and always different image of God and a new and always different relationship with God can be imagined and experienced. Street art in its contemporary form can be traced to the Philadelphia and New York of the 1960s and 1970s but has older roots that reach back to the graffiti of Ancient Rome. The term ›street art‹ is used for a number of different forms and techniques ranging from performances to poetic assault to graffiti and murals, using words and images (or even, as in graffiti, words as images) in interventions in (mostly) urban space. Street art is a phenomenon that is difficult to capture, and its understandings and evaluations are as diverse as the forms it may take. It can be seen as vandalism because it is often created on walls, train cars, or buildings without the owner's permission, as the beautification of drab urban spaces, or as art. Street art might have a political message, like the murals that visualized the conflicting parties and their concerns in Northern Ireland, or messages of protest in some Latin American countries,[26] or it can be an expression of individual or group identity, such as gang tags. Street art might also be a critique of the commodification of urban spaces through advertising and commercialization, as in the case of the street artist Princess Hijab who understands her covering up of bodies in advertise-

26 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland, Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992; Lyman G. Chaffee, Political Protest and Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993.

ments with a hijab of black paint as an act of resistance.[27] Or street art may be a gift intended to enchant the urban space.[28] Because it is produced in a public space and can be created and viewed by anybody – without particular training or qualifications required of the artist or the viewer's payment of an entry fee – street art can be considered »a decentralized, democratic form«,[29] withdrawn from the control of elites or markets,[30] even though that distance from the conventions of the art world and its market is not absolute, as can be seen in more recent developments of museums dedicated to street art or art by street artists sold at auction.

While not uncontested,[31] for our purposes, Nicholas Alden Riggle's definition of street art is helpful as an attempt to somewhat delimit this vast field. He defines an artwork as street art »if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning. […] The definition implies that street art is likely to be, among other things, illegal, anonymous, ephemeral, highly creative, and attractive.«[32] Riggle's definition underlines that for their creations, street artists draw on the street as their material – the walls of particular buildings, the pavement, the built material, natural growth and spatial organization, the play of light and shadow, as well as the population of those living in or interacting with the space in their various practices. That is, the space of the street is necessary for its creation, existence, and meaning so that separated from the street and its specific location, the artwork would no longer exist. With this definition, Riggle differentiates street art from public art in which the space of the street is transformed into a museum but not integrated into the work itself with all its materiality, everyday practices, and unpredictabil-

27 Annelies Moors, NiqaBitch and Princess Hijab: Niqab Activism, Satire and Street Art, Feminist Review 98.1: Islam in Europe (2011), 128–135, here 134.

28 Luca M. Visconti/John F. Sherry Jr./Stefanie Borghini/Laurel Anderson, Street Art, Sweet Art?: Reclaiming the ›Public‹ in Public Space, Journal of Consumer Research 37.3 (2010), 511–529, here 521.

29 Chaffee, Political Protest and Street Art, 4.

30 This is beginning to change as street art is integrated into the structures of the art market with art works being sold at auction and exhibited in museums.

31 See for a critique and alternative definition focusing on the criterion of aconsensuality Sondra Bacharach, Street Art and Consent, British Journal of Aesthetics 55.4 (2015), 481–495.

32 Nicholas Alden Riggle, Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 68.3 (2010), 243–257, here 246.

ities that might even endanger the work.[33] Street art draws on the street as »an arena for political and cultural expression, violence and crime, urban gender roles, advertising and commerce, and the street as a counterpoint to museums and other traditional art venues.«[34] Thus, the space of the street is essential for street art, and in the interaction between artists, work, viewers, and space, the space itself plays a constitutive role and vice versa, is constituted as a meaningful space through these relationships, as we will see below.

Given the diversity of forms, motivations, and evaluations of street art, we will focus here on a concrete example, the *Surfing Madonna* (2011) by Mark Patterson (1953–2023), before developing some more general thoughts about the imagining of space, community, and faith in and through street art in the concluding section. The *Surfing Madonna* (fig. 1) is a mosaic that was installed clandestinely by the artist Mark Patterson and his friend, Bob Nichols, on Good Friday (which in 2011 coincided with Earth Day, April 22), under a railroad bridge in Encinitas, an affluent, mostly White community on the coast of Southern California just north of San Diego. Shortly afterwards, in May 2011, Nichols and Patterson founded the Surfing Madonna Oceans Project, a non-profit organization that combines environmental activism for the protection of the oceans with community building, such as beach camps for children with special needs or veterans.[35] When the mosaic was first installed in Encinitas without a permit, it was considered vandalism, and, once the artist was identified, he was charged with the removal of the artwork and a fine. Eventually, the *Surfing Madonna* found a permanent home on the façade of Leucadia Pizzeria near the original site, close to an intersection with Highway 101 and about ten minutes from the beach. In front of the image and separated by a few steps from the sidewalk, a small cove-like area has been carved out with a bench under trees to one side, allowing viewers to visit with the image, read the plaque that describes its story, and find a moment of stillness, prayer, or meditation in this little niche next to the street and downtown area of Encinitas (fig. 2).

33 Riggle, Street Art, 254.

34 Lydia Yee, Introduction, in: Lydia Yee/Withney Rugg (eds.), Street Art Street Life: From the 1950s to Now: Essays by Katherine A. Bussard, Frazer Ward, and Lydia Yee, New York: Bronx Museum/Aperture Foundation, 2008, 6–7, here 6.

35 Surfing Madonna Oceans Project, Our Mission, https://www.surfingmadonna.org [accessed 17 April 2025].

Fig. 1: Mark Patterson, *Surfing Madonna* (2011), stained glass mosaic, 300 x 300 cm, Encinitas. Photo Stefanie Knauss.

Fig. 2: New permanent placement of the *Surfing Madonna* in a cove-like area. Photo Stefanie Knauss.

Fig. 3: Detail of Mark Patterson, *Surfing Madonna*. Photo Stefanie Knauss.

The mosaic shows the Virgin Mary, surrounded by a golden mandorla, on a surfboard riding a deep-blue wave that breaks above her head, her green cloak billowing in the wind around her, her hands folded in prayer, with the words ›Save the Ocean‹ written vertically in lighter color on a darker blue background along the left margin. While it might be unexpected to see the Virgin Mary on a surfboard with her feet in wetsuit booties showing under her dress (fig. 3) and the outline of her left leg suggested under her floating red dress, the figure is clearly recognizable as the Virgin of Guadalupe: the mandorla, the position of her head (slightly bending to the right, with her eyes cast down), her folded hands and her red dress with black tassels are all part of the traditional iconography of the Guadalupe,[36] whose image indeed inspired the artist in the long process of creation from a first sketch in 2005 to the mosaic's realization in 2011.[37]

Aesthetically, the *Surfing Madonna* is stunning, which is a major requirement for street art that has to compete against a multitude of visual impressions in the public square. Its vibrant color scheme is simple but effective with its combination of the intense dark blue of the water, Mary's green cloak, her red dress, the golden mandorla and the sparkling white of the surfboard. Artistically, the mosaic is carefully executed, with Mary's facial expression and other details of her figure, the shades of blue and white of the water and the breaking wave rendered clearly and with subtlety. The dynamic composition adds to the impact of the artwork, with the surfboard pointing down to the left, Mary's cloak billowing in the wind and her legs positioned for balance on the board.

Yet the strength of the mosaic's visual impact is not so much due to its colors or composition but to the incongruence of its motif: the Madonna

36 According to the legend, the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego at Tepeyac Hill (Mexico) in the 16th century as a young, apparently Indigenous woman speaking Nahuatl, the native language of what today is Mexico. Combining Aztek and Christian religions, Indigenous and European cultures, local tradition and colonial power, the Virgin of Guadalupe has since become central to Mexican and, more broadly, Latin American identity. See Roberto Lint Sagarena, Making a There There: Marian Muralism and Devotional Streetscapes, Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation 25.1–2 (2009), 93–107, here 95; Guisela Latorre, Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008, 222.

37 Mark Patterson, Mark's Story, https://www.surfingmadonna.org/meet-mark-patterson-the-artist [accessed 21 April 2025].

on a surfboard? The idea is at the very least surprising, and thus the image cuts through the visual clutter of the busy road and downtown area. For some, the playful reference to the visual tradition of the Guadalupe, putting her on a surfboard – having her *play* in the ocean – might be blasphemous; for others it might be humorous; in others the motif might evoke feelings of devotion to the Virgin or of the spirituality of water and ocean; others yet might appreciate it as an expression of Latinx religion and Indigenous culture. These various reactions can be intuited from the dedications on the paving stones on the ground, some of which indicate the donors' religious or environmental concerns associated with the mosaic and the Virgin motivating their contribution to the creation of the cove. For those passing by in their cars or on foot, the aesthetic experience of the beauty of the colors, the dynamic composition, and the surprise of the motif momentarily suspends the space and time of the everyday, as if rupturing its structures or opening up a view into a different dimension, all the while being situated right in the middle of ordinary life with its routines. The mosaic creates a heterotopic space that is clearly localized – at the intersection of B Street and Highway 101 – and yet disrupts this space dedicated to transportation and commerce by offering a space and time that is not clearly defined but open to the playful imagination of those who enter and inhabit it.

In spite of its subject matter, the *Surfing Madonna* was not primarily created as a work of religious art – a category which we have sought to problematize throughout this volume in any case – with the aim to express or inspire religious feelings. The artist's intention was to raise the environmental consciousness of the population of this community which in many ways depends on the ocean. It is worth underlining, however, that Patterson chose to represent this ›secular‹ environmental message through a religious motif and that the apparently secular(ized) image of the Madonna has evoked a religious reception when people started to treat it as a shrine to the Guadalupe (although a very SoCal version of it), at times leaving candles in front of it. As mentioned, the paving stones also testify to this twofold – sometimes separate and sometimes intertwined – environmental and spiritual-religious significance of the work with dedications and intentions such as: »Mary, Mother of God, protect the innocent, always give us hope«, »Save the ocean, save the world«, or »To our beloved Mother Ocean«.

Aside from the artist's personal relationship with the Guadalupe,[38] the connection between the religious motif of the Virgin and the environmental message of the mosaic also has roots in traditional forms of devotion to Mary who is called *Stella Maris*, the Star of the Seas, and considered the patron of sailors and seafarers. As the encyclicals of Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (2015) and *Laudate Deum* (2023), make amply clear, environmental and climate concerns are at the heart of the Christian faith in a creator God with the consequent human responsibility and care for creation, and thus the motif of the Madonna adds religious authority to the socio-political message of ocean protection. Furthermore, the connection with, reverence for, and care for nature are significant also for those for whom surfing is a spiritual practice and religious experience.[39] The *Surfing Madonna* can thus be understood as a polyvalent motif that is able to bring together Catholics and non-Catholics, environmentalists, political and social activists, surfers, and believers. This blurs the lines between politics and religion that are particularly controversial in the USA and opens up the clearly defined spaces that each – the church/religion and the state – have claimed for themselves. Disrupting the ordinarily binary separation between secular environmental discourse and religious devotional discourse, the mosaic and its cove become an extra-ordinary space, a heterotopia in which it is possible to imagine different forms of connectedness with creation, community, and the divine.

With its motif, the mosaic also taps into the traditions of its location and thus establishes particular relationships with the space in which it is placed. Although the artist himself is not Latino, the Southern Californian context in which he lives and works is strongly influenced by its large, and often marginalized, Chicanx and, more broadly, Latinx population, and consequently the Virgin of Guadalupe as the protagonist of Latinx religious devotion is a frequent motif both in public and private art in the area.[40] In addition, Southern California has a strong tradition of mural art, in particular as an expression of Chicanx identity, which functions in a twofold way to affirm the sense of self within the marginalized community and represent it

38 Patterson, Mark's Story.

39 Bron Taylor, Surfing into Spirituality and a New, Aquatic Based Nature Religion, Journal of the American Academy of Religion 75.4 (2007), 923–951.

40 Sagarena, Making a There There, 94.

to outsiders.[41] Thus, both the motif and its form as a mural create a connection with the Chicanx and Latinx communities of Southern California. At the same time, by putting the Virgin on a surfboard, the artist relates to the surfing community along the Pacific coast. Most passers-by will recognize the position of Mary's feet and legs on the board, either from watching surfers out on the ocean or from their own experience. The fact that Mary holds her hands folded rather than spreading her arms to keep her balance riding the waves might make her even appear somewhat superhuman to those who have tried to stay atop a surfboard before. The cross between surfing and religion becomes even more apparent in the concrete place where the artwork is now situated. Mounted on the façade of Leucadia Pizzeria, the *Surfing Madonna* is close to the intersection of Highway 101 and B Street in Encinitas. Highway 101 is the historical highway that runs along the Pacific coast from San Diego all the way up to Olympia, Washington, with the section between San Diego and San Francisco approximating the old route connecting the Spanish missions – called *el camino real*, ›the royal road‹ – along which the missionaries brought Christianity and the Madonna to the region in the first place. B Street, on the other hand, runs west towards Moonlight State Beach and ends right at the ocean that the mosaic calls to protect, at a beach that is popular among surfers. Thus, it is not just the motif that improbably brings together the spheres of surfing, religion, culture, ecology, spirituality, and society, but these spheres intersect in the space where the *Surfing Madonna* is situated. Through the iconography chosen by the artist and the place in which it is located, the work serves as a visual marker of the communities – contemporary and historical – inhabiting this space and their concerns: surfers, environmentalists, Latinx, Chicanx, Indigenous communities, Spanish missionaries, Catholic believers, practitioners of ocean spirituality.

But more than just being a reflection of something that is already there, the *Surfing Madonna* also contributes to the creation of this space as a meaningful place in a new way for the people inhabiting it, permanently or in passing. It is not only situated at the street leading to the ocean but with its dark blue background, the mosaic itself seems to open up the space of the city onto the water, to offer a glimpse of the sea right next to the street, combining its message ›Save the Ocean‹ with a momentary experience of its depths.

41 Latorre, Walls of Empowerment.

In the middle of concrete and exhaust fumes, the mosaic creates a space of nature, aesthetically through the dark blue color, materially in the trees and shrubs flourishing in its cove, and conceptually through the reminder that nature and the oceans need our protection if we want to be able to continue to live in this world. At the same time, next to the traffic of the busy streets and the pizzeria, shops, and other businesses along Encinita's main street, the *Surfing Madonna* and its small cove constitute a space of stillness and meditation, relating to Chicanx and Latinx Catholic spirituality and non-denominational, nature-based spiritualities at the same time. Here, the space of the sacred is not ontological, pre-existent and defined by the norms of architecture and theology, but it is created through the artwork and the practices through which the people inhabiting the space relate to it. As a sacred space, it is not withdrawn or separated by a boundary from the world of the profane; on the contrary, it is right in the middle of the everyday. With its disruption of both the norms of the everyday and the ›norms‹ of the sacred, it is a liminal space that opens up for something that goes beyond it and allows for a playful and expansive imagination – be it the experience of the vastness of the ocean, the exhilaration of riding a wave, or a sense of relationship with the Madonna or the transcendent.

The experience of the artwork and what it offers is not limited to the individual but also includes a communal aspect. As a work of public street art, it is per se open to and a part of a community. This is expressed through its motif which, as mentioned, relates to and integrates the diverse communities of the space where it is situated, as well as in its reception and further development. When the authorities charged Patterson to remove the mosaic, financial and moral support was abundant: within a few weeks (the artwork remained at its original site only for about two months), the *Surfing Madonna* had become a part of the community who wanted it to remain in their midst. In the search for a new home for the artwork, then, the possibility to have free access to it and in particular, to be able to see it from the road, was one of the priorities. Furthermore, as the origin of the Surfing Madonna Oceans Project, the Madonna is not only at the center of the local community, those who pass by her on their way to work, to the beach, or to a bar, but also of the wider community of those concerned about nature in general, and the ocean in particular, and committed to their conservation. The mission of the foundation »to promote public displays of artistic expression,

create experiences of joy in natural environments, promote ocean awareness and save the ocean for all to enjoy«,[42] includes community building as a central tool. The *Surfing Madonna* and the foundation it inspired thus represent an example for the social dimension of street art as art that happens on the street and with the street and those who live in it, and that thus calls for the realization of right forms of community and relationship – with other people and with the environment – which artworks limited to museums as spaces set apart from the local context and with more individualized codes of aesthetic appreciation might not develop to the same degree.

The *Surfing Madonna* is far from the image of the old, angry God of Meneghello's memories. It is a secular work – although with undeniably religious dimensions and open to a religious or spiritual reception – placed in the middle of the city, with a socio-political message calling for environmental action rather than religious devotion. And yet, the city and the sacred, concern for nature and religious faith do not contradict each other. Playing with the religious iconographic tradition of the Guadalupe in the streets of Southern California, the artist reimagines what being-in-the-world means: responsibility for the communities and environment we live in, relationship, expansive imagination, and, not least, joy and beauty. The artwork and the physical and experiential space it creates are not defined and restricted by religious doctrine and regulations, nor do they prescribe what and how religion or faith has to be, but they are open to the meaning that those who pass by attribute to them when perhaps for a moment they are taken out of their habitual routines to enter into a different space, be it a spiritual experience of transcendence or simply (or perhaps not so simply) a moment of joy and humor. These experiences of space, constituted by the work and its reception, disrupt the separation of the everyday from the sacred, conceived by Eliade as a space set-apart, and allow the mosaic's viewers to see the world in which they live with different eyes – and perhaps to live in it in different ways.

42 Surfing Madonna Oceans Project, Our Mission.

3. In the Margins and at the Crossroads

Maureen O'Connell argues that street art, specifically murals, are »a popular, democratic, and prophetic form of art whose location on inner-city streets integrates the studio and sanctuary in a revelatory ecstasy« and that consequently they should become a part of the theological canon because they help make theology relevant, intellectually responsible, and transformative.[43] In this concluding section, we consider further the aspects in the aesthetic experience of street art which constitute spaces of the sacred not as closed and limiting but as open heterotopic spaces filled by the life and faith of the people who inhabit them. A central condition for this is that the space of the sacred, i.e. the space where the sacred can be encountered as life-giving and life-changing, is understood as a space that makes space for the ever-new and different presence of God. This means that it is a space that is created in the moment of experience by the subjects of this experience – God and human being in their free encounter – and not predefined by expectations about what or who God is or should be, closed in by rigid, stifling norms.

As we said above, in contrast to Eliade, we do not perceive the space of the sacred as the center with its implications of delimitation, power, and stability, clearly separated from the space of the profane situated on the margins. Instead, Foucault's notion of heterotopia as a space in-between, as a third between the private and public, helps us to discover the space of the sacred ›elsewhere‹. As Dehaene and De Cauter write, the heterotopic space represents »[t]he reinvention of the everyday: the ordinary and the extraordinary«.[44] That also includes, we think, reinventing the relationship of profane and sacred spaces beyond their binary opposition, as the liminal, dynamic space of the crossroads (literally so, in the case of the *Surfing Madonna*) and the margins. Street art creates such spaces of marginality in various ways: it is often situated in marginal urban areas inhabited by populations that are socially marginalized by poverty, unemployment, or crime, by their ethnic

43 Maureen O'Connell, The Streets as Studio and Sanctuary: Community Murals, Theology, and Social Transformation, Arts 19.2 (2008), 20–28, here 20. For her research of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program and her proposal of an aesthetic ethics, see Maureen O'Connell, If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012.

44 Dehaene/De Cauter, Introduction, 4 (original emphasis).

identity or their lifestyles. Street art is also marginal in relationship to the artworld: it is often created by artists who have no formal training and might opt for anonymity like Mark Patterson did initially, and, sometimes, the artists are themselves members of the marginalized populations in whose environments they create their works, making of the margin a space of creativity and expressivity.[45] Also, as art on the street, it is not part of the dynamics of the art market with its structures of critics, galleries, fairs, exhibitions, and auctions. Street art cannot be sold, bought, transported to a museum or the safe of a private owner: if a piece is taken away from the street, it is no longer street art in its constitutive interaction with the material conditions of its location as defined by Riggle; it becomes a different work.[46]

While finding itself at the margins in multiple ways, street art is nevertheless right at the center: in the midst of everyday life, it is not set apart in the parallel world of the museum with its air-conditioned rooms where viewers are not able to touch the works, a space that in many ways is similar to the space of the church as represented by Meneghello or Seidl to which ›normal‹ people have no or only limited access and that only religious specialists are allowed to fully inhabit. In contrast, street art is part of everyday life; as Riggle writes, it is art that »join[s] the living«.[47] The flashes of beauty and surprise – perhaps even the moment of revelatory ecstasy that O'Connell mentions in her discussion of Philadelphia murals with reference to Paul Tillich's experience in front of Botticelli's *Madonna*[48] – that people experience in the encounter with street art are a part of and, at the same time, a disruption or ›reinvention‹ of their everyday lives, and only because of this paradoxicality are they able to impact this life. The space of the margin – the empty lot, derelict factory building, damp underpass, bleak highway intersection, considered barren and useless from the perspective of urban planning and real estate development – becomes a space of creativity, new relationships, surprise, and expansive imagination as the unexpected interrupts the routine of the everyday.

This is the case because, in spite of its presence in the everyday with its suggestions of routine, street art is characterized by an element of transgression

45 Latorre, Walls of Empowerment, 2.

46 Riggle even describes street art as antithetical to the artworld (Riggle, Street Art, 248), although this antithesis is no longer as stark as it may have been in street art's earlier years.

47 Riggle, Street Art, 256.

48 See Chapter 3 of this volume for a discussion of Tillich's theological engagement with art.

and surprise – realized to various degrees in different circumstances – which are essential for its potential to create, together with the viewers interacting with it, a space of openness and transformation which disrupts the binary of center and margin, sacred and profane. As the example of the *Surfing Madonna* has shown, street art transgresses legal norms if it is not commissioned and realized with permission of property owners and therefore considered vandalism and illegal. Street art is also transgressive in its use of forms and motifs that might not comply with what is considered polite or appropriate – such as placing the Guadalupe on a surfboard – and thus disrupt »the homogeneity of urban design that fosters a visual culture of advertisements, property signs and political propaganda«.[49] While transgressions of social and legal norms might hurt individuals and the social order and thus are seen as problematic by many, they are the necessary condition for change and transformation. Without the critique and disruption of the already known, new visions – let alone the motivation to realize them – would not be possible. The prophetic voice both denounces what is wrong with the status quo and imagines a new way of being. Transgression does not have to be violent or hurtful, but it can also occur in the form of play when the norms and regulations of the everyday no longer work in the world of play with its different rules.

The transformation realized in and through street art can be multifaceted. It is first of all a transformation of space from perhaps grey and drab to colorful and striking, from a space of conventional normativity to one of playful surprise. It is also a transformation of the artists who find a voice to express themselves, and of the viewers who are shaken out of their routines in a moment of wonder. Depending on the situation, a mural can also create and transform communities, as the Surfing Madonna Oceans Project is attempting to do, or as is already the case in the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program in which murals are planned and realized together with the local community in a long process that includes working through conflicts, healing wounds, and finding new ways of living together.[50] And finally, the various transgressions of street art can create a space in which the conventions of theological imagination are transformed. As Thomas Dicken writes, graffiti or street art can be seen as a powerful metaphor (and perhaps more) for

49 Silvia Loeffler, Urban Warriors, Irish Arts Review 29.1 (2012), 70–75, here 72–73.

50 Ruth Illman/W. Alan Smith, Theology and the Arts: Engaging Faith, London: Routledge, 2013, 69–80.

doing theology and thinking about God in a way that is critical, shocking, and disruptive of truth claims, making it impossible to lock God into doctrines and ideologies.[51] Instead street art opens up new spaces of imagining a God who is a part of this world and encounters humans in ever new ways in their everyday life in experiences of beauty or healing.

An essential part of this transformative transgressiveness of street art is its ephemeral form. While the *Surfing Madonna* now has found a permanent home, many works of street art are removed or painted over within hours of their creation. And even if street art is created with permission and not in danger of being removed, it is still exposed to sun, rain, wind, and exhaust fumes and will decay under their influence. This might be regrettable, but it is part of what street art is: it is not made for eternity; it gains its meaning precisely from being here and now, in this moment, and it does not claim to extend this moment across time or space or to have validity beyond the here and now. The temporality of street art also means that it makes space for what others might have to say when the moment calls to them. In a sense, it is the art of the *kairós*, the qualitatively right moment (in contrast to a quantitative, linear understanding of time) when this – whatever it is – needs to be said (or painted) in order to create new possibilities and new freedom.[52] Street art thus never claims to have the last word but at most the second-to-last, as it is open to make space for new realities to replace it. And this is the most we can claim regarding our knowledge of God, as well (although theology often forgets its own contingency and preliminariness). We know as well as we can right now, and hopefully our knowledge, our images of God may give us a greater understanding of the divine and our relationship to it, but we cannot claim to know God absolutely, in all of the dimensions of God's being. Dicken argues that a graffiti that has disappeared has its own story to tell, and he draws the analogy to the empty tomb of Christ, calling it »a kind of graffiti-undoing-graffiti«, when the emptiness of the tomb speaks volumes about the presence it

51 Thomas M. Dicken, Graffiti Theology: Criteria and an Agenda, Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory 12.1 (2012), 82–99.

52 Daniel Weidner describes Paul Tillich's understanding of *kairos*, as developed in his first text on the concept from 1922, as a call to »enter into the very moment of change«. It is »the charismatic instant of the fullness of time; in other words, it is always loaded with tensions, possibilities, and impossibilities«; Daniel Weidner, Prophetic Criticism and the Rhetoric of Temporality: Paul Tillich's *Kairos* Texts and Weimar Intellectual Politics, Political Theology 21.1–2 (2020), 71–88, here 81.

replaces:[53] emptiness, disappearance, not-knowing can be even more expressive than presence or representation. Street art thus creates a space that is at the same time there and not there because in its presence, in the creation of its space, the disappearance and absence of this space are already implied.

In all its ephemerality, street art is nonetheless concrete and material; it is *there*, even though its presence foreshadows its future absence. In its presence, it participates in the re-creation of space together with all those who inhabit this space, permanently or temporarily. Henri Lefebvre argues that space is created through social relationships and practices.[54] This might happen in a conscious fashion when architectural constructions shape space in certain ways and for certain purposes, for example in the design of a town square where people meet each other, markets are held, and traffic is limited to make these interactions possible. But it might also be less conscious, for example when people keep moving across a piece of lawn between two points and after a while create a path which eventually is filled in with gravel so that a new passageway is added to the network of streets in a city. Relationships and practices attribute meaning to space, and, vice versa, they are given meaning by the space in which they occur. And of course it is entirely possible that the same space may have different meanings at different times (a church building might have been a place of worship once but then become a museum or a brewery at another point of time) or for different people (a courthouse will certainly have a very different significance for the lawyer or judge than for the defendant). Street art is part of these practices and relationships that create meaningful spaces: the *Surfing Madonna*, playing with a network of references related to the surfer and Latinx communities, to environmental protection and different religious traditions, creates a religious space for some who pass by, for others, the work makes out of a street corner a piece of nature, and for some it is both in the entanglement of the oceans with the Stella Maris. Even if street art is considered as vandalism that does not create spaces but instead destroys them, in this negative sense, it still has a transformative impact on the spaces of the city and the relationships taking place in them.

As Silvia Loeffler writes, street art is »a site-specific public forum, where political affiliations as well as sentiments of loss and trauma are publicly dis-

53 Dicken, Graffiti Theology, 91.

54 Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space [1974], translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

played.«[55] The spaces created through street art are both individual and collective spaces and as heterotopic spaces, they represent spaces beyond the binary of private or public. Sometimes, an artwork marks a significant space for an individual with a deeply private, intimate significance for them, but through its sheer presence in the public sphere, it makes this space public and meaningful for others as well (even if, perhaps, in a different way) and thus potentially creates opportunities for interactions that connect the individual with the collective. This was the case, for example, in the project *Linda's Ex*, a series of messages to ›Linda‹ from her ex-partner left for her on the walls of Berlin. This apparently individual expression of loss and desire acquired a collective meaning when people began to comment the messages or leave themselves letters to Linda or her ex and thus participated in the creation of this space of love, mourning, and comfort.[56]

Space is a necessary condition not just for human existence – we are in the world as our home but not at home in it, as Heidegger says – but also for our flourishing as human beings with agency.[57] Space signifies belonging, and, as such, it contributes to the identity and subjecthood of the individual or a group and is constitutive of their capacity to engage in relationships and actions. But as said before, in its ephemerality, the space created by street art is one of freedom and change rather than stability and confinement; it is a space of *becoming* rather than *being*. By creating and inhabiting a space in which we become ourselves in a dynamic sense, we also become responsible for this space in its material and social dimensions. This is clearly expressed in the *Surfing Madonna*, whose call for environmental protection and community building shows this sense of responsibility for the world in which we live and the beings with whom we share it. Street art as an art form is itself an expression of this sense of responsibility: it speaks into the public realm where people can see what it has to say so that the shared space can become one in which life is possible.[58] The space created by street art is thus one of possibilities and promises: perhaps expressed in the mode of critique or imagined as a utopian vision, like the Madonna riding the blue waves of the Pacific, or perhaps it is itself only the first step of creating new spaces of flourishing in

55 Loeffler, Urban Warrior, 74.

56 Kai Jakob, Street Art in Berlin, 4th ed., Berlin: Jaron Verlag, 2011, 164.

57 Visconti/Sherry/Borghini/Anderson, Street Art, Sweet Art?, 526.

58 Visconti/Sherry/Borghini/Anderson, Street Art, Sweet Art?, 522.

relationship to space, time, and other beings, as in the processes accompanying – but not limited to – the creation of murals in Philadelphia.

Given the multi-layered significance and effects of street art, it may be easy to lose sight of what it is in the first place that makes possible the creation of space, the transformation of worlds, and the imagination of new becoming: the aesthetic dimension of street art. Riggle helpfully reminds us that street art can never be understood through the analysis of the formal aspects of the work alone and necessarily requires attention to the space in which it is created and which it creates: »making sense of street art requires attending to a nonaesthetic feature of the work, namely, its material use of the street.«[59] And yet the aesthetic dimension of street art – including the aesthetic dimensions of the space in which it is placed and through which it is created – plays a major role in its own creation of spaces of imagination and transformation. Drawing on bell hooks and Paul Tillich, O'Connell affirms that beauty can be an occasion for the experience of transcendence.[60] The often striking aesthetics of street art – a necessity if it is to succeed in the visual clutter of the cityscape – make possible the experience of beauty that is even more stunning because encountered in places where we expect only ugliness and decay or, at most, functionality. The colors and shapes interrupt the grey of concrete and the black of asphalt, introducing a new dimension into the rectangular layout of buildings and streets. Turning a corner and seeing the Madonna on a surfboard in colors that appear both warm and deep, one experiences a moment of surprise that might turn into awe and a sense of wonder amidst the routines of the everyday. In street art, space is not opened up by cracks and crevices in buildings or streets through which the snow falls like in Tarkovsky's ruins of churches, but, instead, it opens in the unexpected aesthetic experiences of the beautiful, the disturbing, or even the ugly.

Street art is an example of a heterotopic space, a liminal space at the margins and crossroads that is both material and transient. It creates an open space in which, different from the paradoxically restrictive »immense space« of Meneghello's childhood church, we are invited to play and where we can imagine new relationships with each other and with the God who will forever surprise us. Fundamentally, in its transgressiveness and ephemerality, street art makes space to imagine differently, beyond conventions and norms, and

59 Riggle, Street Art, 249.

60 O'Connell, The Streets as Studio and Sanctuary, 20, 25.

in ever-new ways. With its presence that already includes its future absence, street art opens up the space of the street into a vastness that is hospitable to the visions and experiences of those who pass through or inhabit this space, now and in the future: it is a space of the not-yet, a space of becoming, promise, and surprise.

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Chapter 8
The Utopian Longing of Musicals
Experiencing Transcendence in Entertainment

Stefanie Knauss

1. Introduction

A woman and a man walk through a street, the darkness interrupted by small pools of light from old-fashioned street lamps, her bright yellow dress and his white shirt standing out against the night. They arrive at an outlook with a beautiful view across Los Angeles, the lights of the city twinkling under the purple sky (fig. 1). The two have been at odds since they first met and they keep bickering as they walk. But as soft piano music starts on the soundtrack, the atmosphere shifts and the man – Sebastian – starts singing, slowly spinning around a lamp pole like Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen/Gene Kelly, US 1952). The lyrics, however, contradict what appears to be a highly romantic moment and in fact, they make that contradiction explicit: »What a waste of a lovely night«, sings Sebastian, since there's no spark between them. And Mia agrees: »I'm frankly feeling nothing.« As the rhythm picks up, the two move into a tap dance routine à deux until the music slows down again, they stop dancing, and, as the camera zooms into a close-up of their faces, they look as if they are going to kiss – only to be interrupted by Mia's phone: her boyfriend is calling.

Fig. 1: *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, US 2016), film still.

Together, the soft piano music and the visuals – the sky shaded from pastel pink to dark purple above the lights of the city, the street lamp creating a small protective circle of light around the couple against the darkness of the street, the choreography of the dance number at first emphasizing the apparent antagonism between the two and then pulling them closer together – create a dreamy atmosphere in which anything might be possible, even a kiss between Mia and Sebastian, with their squabbling and animosity – explicit in the lyrics of the song and embodied in their movements – more like foreplay than the expression of real, unsurpassable differences. It is a moment of escape – »the pink sky [becomes] escapism in its purest form«, as critic Niklas Lotz writes in his review of the film[1] – from the frustrating reality of their lives: Mia was networking at the party they just left to kickstart her career as an actress, while Sebastian, who dreams of opening a jazz club, played mindless 80s pop to entertain the guests. It is a moment of illusion that they might find something special, only to be shattered by the sound of Mia's phone, the sound of reality.

With the affective power of the combination of music, dance, and emotionally charged narratives, musicals like *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, US 2016), from which this scene is taken, could be considered the epitome of escapism from harsh reality into a world where people sing and dance in the

1 Niklas Lotz, Resonanzen finden statt die Welt abzubilden: Wo Konflikte singend und tanzend beigelegt werden: Die Musicalfilme der vergangenen zehn Jahre im Rampenlicht, Filmdienst.de, 16 December 2024, https://www.filmdienst.de/artikel/70152/essay-uber-filmmusicals [accessed 2 June 2025]; in the original: »der pinke Himmel [wird] zur Weltflucht in Reinform«.

middle of the street, where enemies turn into lovers, and dreams come true. Consequently, musicals are often summarily dismissed as shallow entertainment without any deeper significance, perhaps even, as Ernst Bloch writes disparagingly about Hollywood films in general, a means »of ideological stupefaction and fascistic incitement«,[2] whose visions of dreams-come-true numb the masses in order to reconcile them with their oppression by the capitalist class. Instead, rather than simply discounting entertainment as useless or even dangerous, Richard Dyer proposes to draw on the concept of ›utopia‹ in order to understand how entertainment – such as musicals, the example he discusses and on which I focus here, as well – functions and what it does: »Two of the taken-for-granted descriptions of entertainment, as ›escape‹ and as ›wish-fulfilment‹, point to its central thrust, namely, utopianism. Entertainment offers the image of ›something better‹ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide.«[3] While Bloch was not, as indicated, impressed by Hollywood productions, he, too, recognizes that films, when liberated from their ideological entanglements, can offer a vision of what is possible, a vision of a new world.[4]

According to Dyer's definition of entertainment as »a type of performance produced for profit, performed before a generalized audience (the ›public‹), by a trained, paid group who do nothing else but produce performances which have the sole (conscious) aim of providing pleasure«,[5] entertainment results from capitalist relationships of production (produced by professionals with the purpose of creating profit), and thus the dreams and escapism that entertainment offers – the pleasure it provides – are framed and limited by capitalist interests. But Dyer argues that entertainment »does not simply reproduce unproblematically patriarchal-capitalist ideology«.[6] The more or less explicit ideological struggles between capital and the workforce in the process of production leave their traces in the products which might contradict hegemonic ideologies and provide an opening for dreams of a dif-

2 Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope [1959], translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986, 410.

3 Richard Dyer, Entertainment and Utopia, in: Richard Dyer, Only Entertainment, 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2002, 31–44, here 32.

4 Bloch, The Principle of Hope, 411.

5 Dyer, Entertainment and Utopia, 32.

6 Dyer, Entertainment and Utopia, 32.

ferent society. Thus, the utopian longing expressed in and encouraged by entertainment is ambivalent: it offers an alternative to the reality of capitalist society but it does so within the framework of capitalist ideology, both affirming and questioning this framework to different degrees depending on the specific production.

This ambivalence of the utopian imagination of entertainment characterizes utopia also more broadly as a form: generally understood as a disruptive critique of the status quo and the imagination of a better world of individual and communal flourishing, and often associated with a progressive left-wing or Marxist approach, it is important to note that utopias also exist on the Right and that utopian visions of the good life or ideal humanity might be reactionary and function to maintain the status quo by repressing change. Not all utopias are necessarily ›good‹ in all aspects; their realization might have negative consequences, or their imagined ›better‹ world might only be better for some people or groups but not for others. Richard Howells thus realistically notes: »one person's Utopia is another's dystopia.«[7]

Given this fundamental ambivalence, in this chapter I argue that musicals highlight and shape the capacity and need for utopian longing and hope in human existence (something the previous chapter briefly touches upon in the discussion of the prophetic-utopian potential of street art), while also embodying its ultimate unattainability. To be clear, the film musicals I discuss here – *La La Land* and *Emilia Pérez* (Jacques Audiard, FR/US/MX 2024) – do not propose a ›Christian utopia‹; but I suggest that their stories and the affective mode in which they are told offer theological insights. The musicals lay open the internal structure of utopia as transcendental, reflecting both the human capacity for transcendence and – through the failures of the utopias they represent – the ultimate human incapacity to find fulfillment in their own achievements in this world, so that the always only imperfectly realized utopian striving for the transcendent reflected in the films *ex negativo* points the human being toward absolute fulfillment possible only in the new creation of God's realm. Thus, this chapter contributes to the foundational theological reflection on the conditions of the possibility of human openness for and orientation towards the absolutely transcen-

7 Richard Howells, A Critical Theory of Creativity: Utopia, Aesthetics, Atheism and Design, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 8.

dent God this volume has pursued as a whole, by focusing on the encounter with musicals and their specific constitution in music, dance, and narrative, yet without attempting a dogmatic formulation of what the utopia humans long for should look like in its specifics.

I will begin with tracing the contours of the notion of ›utopia‹ and its significant elements from philosophical and theological perspectives and discuss how musicals formally express utopian longing, drawing especially on *La La Land* – a more ›typical‹ musical than *Emilia Pérez* – for examples. I then turn to a more detailed analysis of *La La Land*'s utopian imagination of individual fulfillment and its failures. The critically acclaimed but also controversial recent musical *Emilia Pérez* will then provide an occasion to attend to the ambivalence of utopia between repression and liberation experienced in the reception of the film's representations of trans identities and Mexican society. The critical-constructive potential of utopia expressed in the films, I conclude, provides important nourishment for the utopian imagination of viewers, but the frustrations that viewers also experience – when protagonists do not fully realize their dreams or when a film's utopia does not respond to the needs of a community – point them towards their existence in the tension between reality and utopia as beings (capable) of transcendence.

2. Utopia in Philosophy, Theology, and Musical

2.1 Utopia between the Good Place and the Non-Place: Philosophical and Theological Discussions

The discussion about the meaning of ›utopia‹, a notion first introduced by Thomas Moore – is it the ›good‹ place (from the Greek prefix *eu-*) or is it the ›non-place‹ (a contraction of the Greek negation *ou-*)? – can serve as an entry point to this brief discussion of philosophical and theological conceptualizations of ›utopia‹. In fact, as Carla Danani notes,[8] the significance of utopia lies precisely in this ambivalence of its imagination as an ideal place (or community, society, life, humanity) and the recognition that this ide-

8 Carla Danani, Utopie, in: Verena Eberhardt/Anna-Katharina Höpflinger/Stefanie Knauß/Marie-Therese Mäder/Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (Hg.), Religion – Medien – Kultur: Interdisziplinäres Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Studium, Baden-Baden: Nomos (forthcoming).

al has not been and never will be fully realized in any concrete place. Thus, as Lucy Sargisson, Ruth Levitas, and others[9] propose, instead of thinking of utopia as a particular state of being to be achieved, it is more helpful to describe utopia as a longing, attitude, process, or method. Howells argues[10] that this utopian method is at work in all forms of human creativity, in the capacity to imagine ›otherwise‹ and create ever-new designs, objects, models of communal living, or even whole alternative worlds. This utopian attitude or method expresses itself in two forms: in the critique of the current imperfect, problematic, unjust state of affairs, and in the constructive vision of a different, better world of individual and communal flourishment, sometimes imagined as a new and future world or as a return to an ideal past of »peace, abundance, leisure, equality, consonance of [human beings] and their environment«, as George Kateb summarizes some main traits of utopian imaginations.[11]

Ernst Bloch, in spite of his blindness to the oppressive elements of the Marxist utopia rather imperfectly realized in the Soviet Union and GDR, remains an important influence in the discussion of utopia. He helpfully distinguishes between abstract and concrete utopia,[12] with abstract utopia, on the one hand, describing a wishful thinking that primarily serves to compensate for the imperfections or dissatisfaction with what is instead of changing it: the utopian function only »flickers up« in wishful thinking, as he writes.[13] Concrete utopia, on the other hand, is oriented towards social engagement and political action to bring about actual change. While the utopian longing expressed in musicals appears to fit Bloch's definition of abstract utopia – which might make it seem easy to dismiss them as mere escapism – it is nevertheless important to recognize the possibility of the anticipation of a better world that may appear even in popular culture, as Bloch also acknowledges.[14] The dreams given shape, color, and sound in musicals do not simply serve to sedate the masses but they also create cracks in their world through

9 See for a discussion Howells, A Critical Theory of Creativity, 26–27.

10 Howells, A Critical Theory of Creativity, 1.

11 George Kaleb, quoted in Dyer, Entertainment and Utopia, 36.

12 Bloch, The Principle of Hope, 145–146. For a detailed discussion of Bloch's concept of utopia, see Howells, A Critical Theory of Creativity.

13 Bloch, The Principle of Hope, 144.

14 Bloch, The Principle of Hope, 411.

which other possibilities may become visible and think-able.[15] At a minimum, the contrast between the dream worlds of popular culture and current reality creates a consciousness of »our mental and ideological imprisonment«, as Fredric Jameson writes.[16] The sense of estrangement characteristic of the form of the musical with the use of extra-diegetic music and dance numbers disrupting its illusion of reality contributes to this contrasting effect and increases its utopian potential precisely because it allows for a different perspective onto the status quo.[17]

Utopia's relationship to reality thus is dialectical. On the one hand, it aims to transcend reality in its imagination of another world with new possibilities which is purposefully ›unrealistic‹ as its goal is to liberate itself from the constraints of reality. But on the other hand, the imagination even of the most different worlds always has its point of departure in this world – the only world we know – and so the constructive impulse of utopia lies in its critical-imaginative response to the imperfections and injustices of this world. Thus, even in its most fanciful flights into the imagination, utopian longing remains connected to and grows out of the concern about and engagement with reality, at the same time as it attempts to transcend it.

This dialectic also shapes the genre conventions of the musical which include both realistic elements and highly artificial and constructed ones. In *La La Land*, the artificially purple sky creates the dream-like atmosphere of the dance scene I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and other non-diegetic dance and song numbers further enhance its unrealistic character. Interestingly, though, Karen Hua notes that the director chooses not to use computer generated imagery to make these artificial elements of the musical's visualization of utopian longing appear as real, but instead he makes their artificiality obvious. In a dance number set in the planetarium, Mia and Seb are lifted into the sky on wires barely visible at the beginning and end of the scene to dance among the stars projected onto the dome of the planetarium. And in a ›what-if‹ sequence at the end of the film, to which I will return below, painted backdrops are chosen to create an illusory Paris

15 Jonathan Roessler, ›Utopianism in Pianissimo‹: Adorno and Bloch on Utopia and Critique, Critical Horizons 23.3 (2022), 227–246, here 235.

16 Fredric Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, London: Verso, 2005, xiii.

17 Lotz, Resonanzen finden.

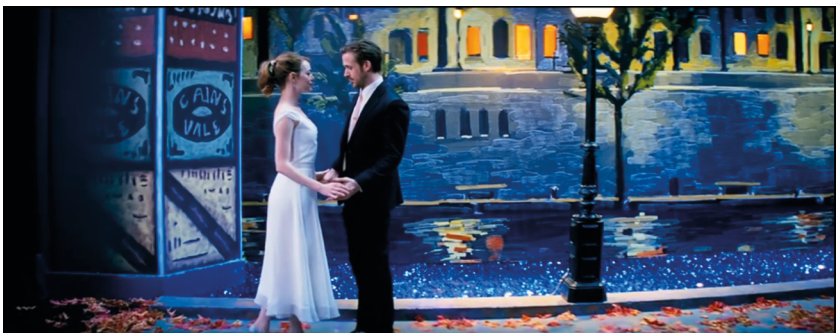

Fig. 2: *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, US 2016), film still.

instead of realistic images of the city (fig. 2).[18] The artificial character of these scenes implicitly recognizes the *real* human capacity for *un*realistic dreaming and creativity. Thus paradoxically, the illusions created by the film could be called a ›realistic‹ element in so far as they represent a reality of human existence, the ability to imagine otherwise.

The film also includes elements of realistic representation of the world with which its utopia contrasts: a montage sequence of short takes of auditions that Mia attends highlights the ruthlessness of the film industry, and the frustration and discouragement displayed by Mia show the real emotional (and financial) costs of trying to achieve her dream to become an actress. The dialectic of reality and utopia is also aestheticized when the setting of a scene – its anchor in the ›real‹ world – fades away to black, highlighting only the protagonist and their dream as if isolating them from the constraints of reality, for example in a scene when the busy restaurant disappears around Seb as he shifts from the cheesy Christmas songs his boss wants him to play to a jazz melody, while Mia listens, enchanted by his music. For a moment suspended in time, the two exist in a world of their own, until reality with its limitations – bills to pay, bosses to please, compromises to be made – comes crashing back as the restaurant setting reappears around them, and Seb's boss fires him.

As this scene makes clear, even if utopian longing imagines a different world in which Seb is able to live his dream, this world cannot be realized:

18 Karen Hua, Behind the Scenes of ›La La Land‹: How the Sets Made the Movie Magical, Forbes, 16 January 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/karenhua/2017/01/26/behind-the-oscar-nominated-production-design-of-la-la-land-david-wasco/ [accessed 15 July 2025].

the light comes back up again, the dream fades away. The good place of utopia is, after all, a non-place, the utopian dream cannot even be fully and perfectly articulated, let alone be realized within the limitations of human life under the social and material conditions that constrain it. Even in moments when the utopian imagination seems to be ›already‹ fulfilled, there is always a ›not yet‹ lingering in the background (or more often, in the foreground), as the musical also shows through the tension between the fulfillment of one dream and the disappointment of another, as I will discuss below. Thus utopian longing is inherently characterized by its transcendent quality as a more-than-reality, with its current incompleteness complemented by the always-future hope of its full realization. This dialectic between the recognition of the limitedness of human capacities under their material conditions and the human potential for creativity, growth, change, and perfection could be described in theological terms with Dennis Doyle and Chad Walsh, as »an eternal struggle to strike a proper balance between the fulfillment of human potentiality and the acceptance of human limitations and sinfulness«.[19]

For Bloch, this transcendent character of utopia is an essential aspect of it. In fact, for him, »[t]he utopian function is also the only transcendent one which has remained, and the only one which deserves to remain: one which is transcendent without transcendence«, connected with the hope for »the Not-Yet-Become, in the shape of a Not-Yet-Become-Good.«[20] Human existence is characterized by this capacity for transcendence which is inherent to utopian longing, as he writes: »[The human being] is that which still has much before it.« It is the utopian impulse which drives human beings to reach beyond their limits in the hopes for the not-yet realized, better world: »[The human being] repeatedly stands ahead on frontiers which are no longer such because [as] he [sic] perceives them, he ventures beyond them.«[21]

While Bloch understands utopia explicitly in non-theistic, secular terms, even as something opposed to religion (although he recognizes the utopian function in religions), from a theological perspective, it is precisely this transcendent impulse in utopian longing that expresses the human capaci-

19 Dennis M. Doyle/Chad Walsh, Utopia and Utopianism, in: Catholic University of America (ed.), New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2nd ed., Detroit/Washington: Thomson/Gale/Catholic University of America, 2003, 359–362, here 362.

20 Bloch, The Principle of Hope, 146.

21 Bloch, The Principle of Hope, 246

ty for relationship with the transcendent, with God. Karl Rahner defines the human being as transcendent being: »In the fact that he [sic] experiences his finiteness radically, he reaches beyond this finiteness and experiences himself as a transcendent being, as spirit. The infinite horizon of human questioning is experienced as an horizon which recedes further and further the more answers he can discover.«[22] As with each utopian vision which turns out to be imperfect, limited in some aspect and thus in need of further imagination, for the human being »[e]very answer is always just the beginning of a new question«.[23] In this transcendent reach for the infinite, which expresses itself also in utopian longing, the human being experiences a »pre-apprehension« of absolute being, the infinite from which the finite human being receives their being.[24]

Utopian longing thus reveals something about the human condition as the being of transcendence. The transcendent dynamic of utopia is also apparent in two additional, related ways, already briefly discussed above, to which I now return from a theological perspective. First, utopia reaches beyond the present reality in the dialectic between being anchored to reality and the utopian vision of a different and better reality discussed above. For Rahner, this tension is an essential mark and challenge of Christian existence: »We are stretched out between heaven and earth and have neither the right nor the capacity to renounce one or the other.«[25] The utopian striving to transcend the boundaries of reality toward something better that lies beyond them – »even though attaining it is difficult, uncertain, or even improbable«[26] – orients me toward the unknowable God in whom the promise of the fulfillment of reality lies. This leads Rahner to reconsider the meaning of ›reality‹ and ›utopia‹: the present reality is now recognized as preliminary and incomplete, whereas what is called ›utopian‹ – and might be considered illusory in a derogatory use of the word – points towards the only true reality, that of God. Thus, in faithful surrender to God, »[w]e are grasped by the

22 Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity, translated by William V. Dych, New York: Seabury Press, 1978, 32.

23 Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, 32.

24 Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, 34.

25 Karl Rahner, Utopia and Reality, translated by R. Modras, Theology Digest 32.2 (1985), 139–144, here 142.

26 Rahner, Utopia and Reality, 140.

really real, by a holy utopia and not a so-called realism.«[27] However, living in the utopian hope in God as the only true reality does not mean a retreat into interiority and a neglect of the Christian responsibility for the world in which we now live and in which we already experience God's presence. In fact, Rahner warns: »Each of us will have to answer to God whether we have fulfilled our political obligations, whether we have loved our neighbors and accorded them freedom and justice.«[28]

Utopia is also transcendent in a second sense, already noted: it is the non-place, that is, it is never fully realized in this world and through human efforts alone. For Christians, this leads to the recognition that only God can bring about the new creation. Utopian imagination is thus an expression of eschatological hope nourished by the faith in God, who is committed to the liberation and flourishing of humanity and creation. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez writes: »Christian hope opens us, in an attitude of spiritual childhood, to the gift of the future promised by God.«[29] While the utopia of liberation from all forms of exploitation and oppression will be fulfilled in God's future, this does not mean that utopian imagination is other-worldly or, to use Bloch's typology, merely an abstract utopia, mere wishful thinking. Instead, like Rahner, Gutierrez insists that Christian utopia is concrete and historical, »subversive to and a driving force of history«.[30] Thus Christians are responsible for working towards the realization of the utopian hope rooted in their faith in God the liberator to bring about – even if imperfectly – a society of solidarity already in this world, trusting in its perfect fulfillment through God: »Faith proclaims that the [fellowship] which is sought through the abolition of exploitation […] is something possible, that efforts to bring it about are not in vain, that God calls us to it and assures us of its complete fulfillment.«[31] Christian utopian hope is nourished by the already-not-yet structure of God's realm announced in Jesus Christ in whose teaching and actions the realm of peace, justice, and love is already present in this world to be fulfilled in God's new creation (Matt 11,2–6). The eschatological

27 Rahner, Utopia and Reality, 141 (my emphasis).

28 Rahner, Utopia and Reality, 144.

29 Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation, translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973, 238.

30 Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 232.

31 Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 237.

character of the already-not-yet utopia in the Christian understanding also emphasizes that all attempts at the realization of an ideal social order are provisional.[32] This ›eschatological proviso‹ thus provides a lens for the critical evaluation of any claims of social utopias and attempts at their realization.

The Christian utopian imagination is nourished by the social criticism and visions of a new world of right relationship among humans and with nature in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, such as Isaiah's vision of a world of peace and justice: »[God] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more« (Isa 2,4). Jesus' acts of healing and social inclusion, his teaching of God's realm of peace and justice, and his death because of the threat his utopian vision posed to those in power provide concrete utopias that both critique current injustice and oppression and imagine a new world of radical love.

Throughout the history of Christianity[33] – from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, in Nicholas of Cusa, and in modern times, in Catholic social teaching and theologies of advocacy for the marginalized and oppressed, such as liberation theology, Black theology, or queer theologies – the Christian utopian function has continued to express itself in its critical mode as a two-fold critique of social injustice *ad extra* as well as – *ad intra* – of the theological short-comings that have contributed to inequality and oppression. Equally, its constructive mode is two-fold, formulating visions of just and equal social and economic systems as well as new ways of theologizing that will further individual and communal flourishing. While the concrete features of these Christian utopias differ among individual proposals, they generally share one aspect: the emphasis on the relational dimension and communal wellbeing which is seen as mutually related to individual flourishing in the recognition of the social nature of the human being. Thus, social justice, the common good, egalitarianism, love, and peace are important elements of biblical and later Christian utopias, even if they have not always fully extended to include women, slaves, or other ›others‹, including animals and nature. Subsequent critical utopias, such as those of feminist, Black, or postcolonial

32 With reference to Johann Baptist Metz, Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 223.

33 For a short overview, see Doyle/Walsh, Utopia and Utopianism, 360–362.

theologies, have critiqued these shortcomings and try to imagine a more fully developed utopia in the dynamic of transcendent striving where each preliminary answer leads to a new question, as Rahner says.

As already noted, however, a sober evaluation of utopian longing in Christianity also has to consider two other aspects. First, as Jesus' life and death shows, the utopian imagination requires commitment in the face of adversity and possible sacrifices, either because one's utopia of justice and equality challenges those in power who might wish to silence the utopian critic or because one has to give up one's own privileges in order to make possible the flourishing of all. Thus even the partial utopia that may be realized in this world will not be without its challenges and pains. And second, as discussed above, a critical consideration of Christian utopias also has to attend to the ambivalence of (Christian and any other) utopias whose liberative visions for some might turn out to be oppressive for others. The imagination of an ideal community might well be based on the exclusion of parts of this community, as has been recognized in the critical theologies committed to the liberation of marginalized and oppressed groups. The oppressive and exclusive potential of utopias is apparent, for example, in the vision of a society shaped by Christian ideals of heteronormativity or a theology of salvation that fully extends only to baptized Christians or, even more exclusively, Catholics. The theological task, Verna Ehret notes,[34] is thus to deconstruct utopian visions through the continuous critical questioning of whether they uphold current privileges, affirm exclusion, or create new inequalities, even in the well-meaning attempt to overcome them.

From both a secular and a theological perspective, utopia can be considered an expression of (eschatological) hope nourished by a humanist faith in the human capacity for creativity and development on the historical plane, which for Christians, however, will only be fulfilled in God's ultimate realization of a new creation of justice and peace. Given their utopian visions of a different world, musicals may thus also be called a ›genre of hope‹.

34 Verna Ehret, Utopia and Narrative: Theology between the Boundaries of Overhumanization and Hypertheism, in: Daniel Boscaljon (ed.), Hope and the Longing for Utopia: Future and Illusions in Theology and Narrative, Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014, 12–21, here 12.

2.2 Affect, Music, and Time: The Utopian Sensibility in Musicals

The utopian imagination unfolds a critical and motivational potential that reaches beyond individual dreams of wish-fulfillment in order to mobilize the collective for social change by charging its visions of a better world with affective intensity. Affect theory provides a helpful lens to understand better how the individual and the collective, the conscious and unconscious, discourse and feeling are connected in the utopian imagination. For the purposes of my reflections here, ›affect‹ can be described with the scholar of religion Jenna Supp-Montgomerie as »the social energy through which subjects, meanings and cultures are produced, organised and undone.«[35] As such, affects are pre-individual and intersubjective but they are felt in the individual body as an experience of intensity, shaping »the relationship between our bodies, our environment, and others.«[36] This includes the relationships among characters in a film (and with their world more in general) and between the film and its viewers. Affects cross the boundaries between screen and audience, drawing them into the world of the film and allowing the utopian longing envisioned on screen to spill over into the audience. As a pre-conscious intensity that cannot be grasped in language, affect is not primarily about the content of an image or a story but about its effect and intensity, as Brian Massumi emphasizes,[37] or, put differently with film scholar Tarja Laine, it is not so much about *what* is told in a film, but about *how* it is told and thus, what the film or story *does*.[38] It is through this affective intensity which is achieved in the embodied reception of its colors, sounds, movements, and other formal elements (together with the resonances these elements have in a social context and an individual viewer) that media are able to move people, as Eric Shouse argues: »the power of many forms of media lies not so much in their ideological effects, but in their ability to create affective resonances independent of content or meaning.«[39] I agree with Shouse about the capacity of media such as film musicals to »create affec-

35 Jenna Supp-Montgomerie, Affect and the Study of Religion, Religion Compass 9/10 (2015), 335–345, here 336.

36 Eric Shouse, Feeling, Emotion, Affect, M/C Journal 8.6 (2005), n. p.

37 As discussed in Patricia Clough, The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Bodymedia and Bodies, Theory, Culture & Society 25.1 (2008), 1–22, here 5.

38 Tarja Laine, Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies, New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2011, 4.

39 Shouse, Feeling, Emotion, Affect.

tive resonances« that have a powerful effect on viewers and are not necessarily identical with the discursively formulated ›meaning‹ of a film. Yet, I would argue that it is precisely this capacity which contributes to the »ideological effects« of media, that is, their ability to endow bodies, groups of bodies, ideas, or imaginaries with an intensity that might attract or repulse, motivate commitment or create opposition on the level of embodied feeling rather than conscious thought or argument and, thus, serve to stabilize ideological positions as common sense within the social order.

This affective capacity is also at play in the utopian potential of musicals and other forms of entertainment, as Dyer argues: »Entertainment does not […] present models of utopian worlds […]. Rather the utopianism is contained in the feeling it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production.«[40] The utopian dimension of musicals can thus be understood as an affective intensity that ›colors‹ the viewers' experience of the dreams and visions of a better life represented in the film in a complex circulation of affects on the screen, between screen and audience, and among the audience, endowing them with a positive charge that attracts us to them and pulls us into their utopian current, even though we remain aware of the disappointing imperfection of the world we inhabit.

The »given mode of cultural production« Dyer mentions are the conditions of the capitalist production system of Hollywood and its conventions of representation that emerge from and reference the Western cultural context. These provide the framework for the codes that musicals employ to achieve this utopian affect, especially by integrating music and dance into the narrative, which both are particularly suited to the creation of pre-conscious and pre-discursive intensities because they communicate without words but through the movement, sound, color, and light that stimulate the sensory system and thus affect viewers on an embodied level. According to film scholar Caryl Flinn, the capacity for pre-discursive communication connects (film) music to utopia because neither can be fully represented: both are, discur-

40 Dyer, Entertainment and Utopia, 20.

sively, ›non-places‹.[41] For Flinn, music is a transcendent phenomenon that creates a sense of harmony and perfection in a world that is imperfect and fragmented and thus achieves, through its form rather than its content, a utopian intensity.[42] Film music – specifically that of the classic Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 40s on which Flinn's study focuses, which is also referenced in the sound and visuals of *La La Land* – evokes a »sense of lost integrity and grandeur«.[43] This musically evoked nostalgia coincides with the utopian impulse to (re-)create the wholeness and perfection of an ideal past as an »eschatological goal«,[44] bringing together the longing for the utopian past and the imagination of its future realization in the affective experience of the present moment.

What film music (and by extension, musicals) offers is not a fully developed utopia but only »glimpses« of it.[45] Because music is non-representational, these glimpses of utopia require interpretation which is always shaped by its context, the subjectivity of the interpreter, and their intentions or goals. With Bloch, Flinn thus cautions that utopia is contingent on its hermeneutic context, both individual and social,[46] as is illustrated by the divergent reception experiences of *Emilia Pérez* which I will discuss below. The interpretation of utopian visions consequently is neither unambiguous nor inherently subversive or liberative, as Flinn points out[47] and as I have also noted above. As we will see in the discussion of the two musicals I have chosen for my considerations here, what might be considered liberative by one person or one group may well be experienced as oppression by another, or the feelings evoked by a musical number may serve to create an affective affinity for values one might otherwise not want to endorse and instill a sense of acquiescence with the limitations imposed by society.

Dyer's discussion of entertainment in terms of utopia also notes this ambivalence of the utopian sensibility whose liberative impulses may remain constrained by the framework of the hegemonic capitalist-patriarchal ide-

41 Caryl Flinn, Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 10.
42 Flinn, Strains of Utopia, 9.
43 Flinn, Strains of Utopia, 91.
44 Flinn, Strains of Utopia, 92.
45 Flinn, Strains of Utopia, 91.
46 Flinn, Strains of Utopia, 103.
47 Flinn, Strains of Utopia, 105.

ology, although this ideological framework is never perfectly tight and subversive contradictions that question the framework may emerge from its cracks. Thus, the categories of utopian sensibility that Dyer identifies in his analysis of musicals – energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, and community – respond, he argues, to the specific constraints and failures of capitalist society: exhaustion, scarcity, dreariness, manipulation, and fragmentation.[48] Dyer notes: »while entertainment is responding to needs that are *real*, at the same time it is also defining and delimiting what constitute the *legitimate* needs of people in this society.«[49] The utopian imagination expressed in entertainment remains framed and constrained by the ruling ideologies which allow to address some needs, such as the need for abundance – and only in ways that fit its ideology (through capitalist consumerism, for example) – but deny others, such as the need for gender, racial, or class equality.[50] According to Dyer, this dialectic between liberation and constraint is apparent on the formal level in the construction of the musical that combines a narrative functioning under the conditions of ›reality‹ with unrealistic non-diegetic music/dance numbers in which the protagonists escape the constraints of realism into utopian worlds of song and dance.[51] While I agree with Dyer regarding the ambivalence of liberation and constraint in the utopian sensibility of the musical and its expression through realistic and fantastic elements on the formal level, I would not limit the realistic element exclusively to the narrative and the utopian to extra-diegetic dance numbers but rather see the ambivalence between realistic constraints and utopian fantasy playing out in the combination of realistic and fantastic conventions of representation at all levels, as the brief reference to the planetarium scene above has shown.

As the following discussion of *La La Land* and *Emilia Pérez* will illustrate, the ambivalences that characterize the utopian impulse on various levels – in the dialectics between reality and imagination, ideological constraint and subversion, oppression and liberation, desire and disappointment, utopia as the good place and the non-place – emerge in the genre of the musical both in its form (the combination of realistic and artificial codes, diegetic and

48 Dyer, Entertainment and Utopia, 37–38.
49 Dyer, Entertainment and Utopia, 36 (my emphasis).
50 Dyer, Entertainment and Utopia, 38.
51 Dyer, Entertainment and Utopia, 38.

extra-diegetic elements, discursive and non-discursive forms of communication) and its reception (being swept away in its utopian longing, encouraged to dream and reach beyond the constraints of one's life, and being rendered complicit with and satisfied by the hegemonic ideological framework). Ultimately, it is these multiple ambivalences that make the musical's utopian sensibility such an interesting case for the theological consideration of the human capacity for transcendence within the constraints of human life limited by finitude and sin.

3. Utopian Ambivalences in *La La Land* and *Emilia Pérez*

3.1 *La La Land*: Professional and Romantic Utopias in Conflict

A traffic jam on a highway in Los Angeles. The camera slowly tracks along the cars, with the music on the soundtrack changing as if it comes from the different radio stations the drivers listen to. Then one driver starts to sing herself, she gets out of her car, and the traffic jam turns into a dance number which introduces the theme of *La La Land*: the utopian longing to realize one's ambition and vocation (in the show and film business for which LA stands, as is implied), to be recognized for who one is and inspire others by doing so, even if the costs are high – which, conceivably, could be considered a utopian dream more easily fulfilled even in a city full of aspiring actors and singers than evading the traffic congestion of the LA highway system. Hollywood itself as the ›dream factory‹ and the utopian potential of the genre of the musical (popularized by Hollywood productions such as *La La Land*) are here, in a meta-narrative move, the topic of the musical's plot, and its forms of representation unfold characteristics of utopian longing outlined in the previous sections: the motivating power of dreams, the sacrifices and failures experienced in the process of trying to realize one's utopia, the dialectic between the nostalgic longing for an ideal past and the hope of a future good life, the ultimate impossibility to perfectly fulfill one's utopian dreams and thus their transcendental dimension, and finally, the ideological constraints of ideological longing.

The singers of this first number emphasize the courage needed to follow one's dream and the risk it involves: »Without a nickel to my name, hopped a bus, here I came, could be brave or just insane, we'll have to see.« And they

agree in the chorus that perseverance is a necessary part of striving for utopia: »Climb these hills, I'm reaching for the heights and chasing all the lights that shine. And when they let you down, you get up off the ground, 'cause morning rolls around, and it's another day of sun.« The singers and dancers turn the annoyance and hindrance of the traffic jam – symbolic of the constraints of reality – into a moment of exuberant utopian freedom and joy as they vault across cars and dance on the highway. While Mia and Seb, the protagonists of *La La Land*, do not directly participate in this first dance number, they are shown to also sit in the traffic jam and thus are a part of the affective energy and optimism generated by the music and dancing right from the beginning of the film.

The utopian longing of the protagonists in *La La Land* is one of self-realization in professional and personal terms: Mia dreams of being an actress, and Seb wants to open a jazz club to give a home to the music he loves and which he feels is no longer appreciated as it should be. The film traces their efforts and failures, as they stumble and »get up off the ground« again in their attempts to realize their dreams: as mentioned, in a sequence of short takes, Mia is shown in one unsuccessful audition after the other without getting a call-back, and when she finally does, she is dismissed after two lines; Seb has to hire out his talent as a jazz pianist to play pop and Christmas songs after he was swindled out of his savings. But as they each struggle to realize their professional utopia, another utopia that they did not plan for comes true: they begin a romantic relationship full of sunshine, laughter, and love, which has them literally dance in the sky in the planetarium scene mentioned above. And because it is a musical, they don't just *look* at the world through rose-colored glasses, but the sky itself really *is* rose, pink, and purple. It seems as if they have achieved the unachievable: perfect love, an ideal relationship.

But this relationship comes at the cost of their professional dreams: Seb joins a band that combines acoustic jazz with electronic music which turns out to be wildly successful, but it means that he compromises his dream of playing pure jazz because he thinks he should have a stable job now that he is in a relationship. And Mia tries to put on a one-woman play she has written but fails miserably when only a handful of people show up for the performance and she overhears their dismissive comments about it and her lack of talent afterwards. For Mia, this failure is the last straw on the camel's back,

and she decides to give up on her dream to be an actress and return home to her family, apparently also taking a break from her relationship with Seb which had already been strained by the frustrations, disappointments, and compromises they experienced in their efforts to realize their dreams. And just then – because it is a musical, after all, whose utopian dynamic pushes against the constraints of reality – Seb takes a call for Mia with an invitation for an audition and rushes to find her in her hometown in Nevada. Although she is wary of putting herself out there again, he convinces her that her dream is worth the risk.

Even though just a moment ago, Mia was ready to give up on utopia and content herself with what reality has to offer, during the audition, she actually recovers her utopian longing. When asked to tell a story, she starts talking about her aunt who inspired her to become an actress and is, so to say, her ›model dreamer‹. As the setting of the audition room around her fades to black, the story turns into a song, first very quiet, which then becomes a passionate endorsement and celebration of »the ones who dream, foolish as they may seem«. Although the actress Emma Stone's eyes slightly move to the right and left of the camera to indicate that she is looking at the diegetic audience of the casting and film directors, the audience in front of the screen is pulled into the current of Mia's fierce defense of the importance of dreaming in spite of »the mess we make«, to let go of the worries about what is realistically achievable, to free ourselves from the constraints we put onto ourselves and that are put onto us, and to soar up like the music, to reach for the impossible, to embrace our dreams. However, the song is about more than simply the motivating power of dreams in individual life. It reaches its climax when Mia sings about the social importance of dreamers whose utopian »madness« »give[s] us new colors to see« through which reality will look different – and »who knows where it will lead us«. Utopian longing, even if expressed in the form of personal dreams and aspirations, has a socially critical and imaginative dimension, »and that's why they need us«: »the painters and poets and plays« are »rebels« who take on the task of critiquing the status quo with their visions of a more colorful, different, better world. Thus their dreams are not just for themselves but the affective dynamic that they create includes all of us and allows us to see the world differently and consequently to live differently. This song seems to echo Bloch's appreciation of the arts – although as mentioned, he was not an enthusiast of Hollywood

cinema – as the »pre-appearance [*Vor-Schein*] of something achieved«, a partially realized vision of something better, which does not have to be limited to the utopia of a different socio-political order but may also include other, more personal dreams and hopes.[52]

However, Mia's success at the audition means that now it is the personal relationship that has to take second place to the professional dream, and Seb and Mia break up so that she is free to pursue her career. The film skips forward five years, and in a scene that repeats an earlier scene, but now with a twist, Mia enters the coffeeshop on a studio lot where she used to work and, like the famous actress she had admired before, she is recognized and offered coffee on the house. This small scene indicates that she has achieved her utopian longing which was embodied in the earlier scene when she was starstruck by the actress entering her coffee shop. In yet another repeat-with-a-twist sequence shortly after, Mia is walking along the street after dinner with her husband when she hears a quiet jazz tune. This time, she is not lured into the restaurant where Seb rebels against his boss by playing jazz instead of Christmas songs and promptly gets fired for it (as in the earlier scene) but into a jazz club which turns out to be Seb's and where he is playing the piano. However, these two sequences – earlier scenes of longing and failure are now turned into moments of utopian fulfillment – are bitter-sweet. Yes, Mia and Seb have fulfilled their dreams of professional success, but it is not a perfect utopia because it meant giving up their love for each other. As Seb plays on, a music/dance sequence suggests an alternative reality: what if Seb hadn't joined the fusion jazz band? What if Mia's play had been a success? What if they had gone to Paris together, had had a family? Would it then have been Seb with Mia, instead of her husband, ending up in a jazz club together, kissing as they listen to the music? The illusory character of this perfect utopia of professional *and* romantic fulfillment is clearly underlined by the dance elements, the use of painted backdrops for scenes in Paris, and other representational codes indicating its artifice (fig. 2). No effort is made on the formal level to create the appearance of realism in this sequence; instead, the fully realized utopia – where Mia and Seb can have it both, living their professional as well as romantic ideal life – is clearly marked as impossible, pure imagination. And so the film shifts back to the ›reality‹ of its plot and

52 Bloch, The Principle of Hope, 156.

as Mia leaves the club with her husband, she turns back and looks into Seb's eyes, their facial expressions – shown for a long moment in shot-counter-shot takes – shifting from sadness about their loss to soft smiles, ending with a nod acknowledging the choices they made and the limitations life placed on them, accepting the incomplete fulfillment of their dreams.

The musical moves dialectically between embracing the individual and social importance of unrestrained utopian longing and realistically stressing its sacrifices and costs, especially the fact that the perfectly realized utopia will always remain the hope of a future to come. This eschatological dimension of utopia is as much at the center of the film as its motivating and orienting power for individual life, reflecting the transcendental character of utopian longing as the individual capacity to always reach beyond one's limitations in the unresolvable tension with the fact that the perfect utopian fulfillment will be possible only in the absolute transcendence of the constraints of this world.

La La Land's utopian sensibility also transcends the temporal order by evoking a past affectively charged as ideal while dreaming of a perfect future. On the formal level, this is achieved through film historical references, such as the lamp post move from *Singin' in the Rain* picked up in the dance number at the overlook or the painted backdrops from the what-if sequence referencing the 1964 version of *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, US), the use of *Rebel Without a Cause* in the plot (Nicholas Ray, US 1955; Seb and Mia watch the film together and visit the planetarium in an explicit reference to the film), the presence of titles dividing the film into parts by season and indicating the five-year break before the last part whose design and function reference the silent film era, and by the use of costumes and settings that evoke an earlier era of Hollywood cinema. These representational choices give *La La Land* a timeless feel, as if it is set in a dream-time beyond reality, while also being concretely situated in the mechanisms and dynamics of the ruthless business of the contemporary film and music worlds.

Yet, while *La La Land*'s utopian longing is transcendental in these several respects, it does not transcend the framework of capitalist neo-liberalism. As a utopia that primarily focuses on individual fulfillment and self-realization, it remains firmly situated within this ideological frame, with the utopian dream of structural change for social justice only briefly hinted at in Mia's audition song. Dyer's observation noted above is also true for *La La Land*: the musical responds to the real needs of neo-liberalist society – in this case especial-

ly the exhaustion it creates with the demands and pressures of urban professional life, the loss of relationship in the competitiveness and fragmentedness of society, and the manipulation by the culture industry that dangles the possibility achieving one's dreams of success and happiness in front of its audience – with the energy of its dance scenes, the protagonists' optimism that encourages them to pursue their dreams in spite of the costs, their deeply felt love for each other, and, not least, the satisfaction of their professional success. But in doing so, as Dyer notes, the musical responds to needs this society itself has created and in a way that remains firmly within its boundaries. The choice that Mia and Seb make between professional success and romantic relationship is a choice required particularly of women which serves to stabilize the social hierarchical gender order and furthers the capitalist system of production and exchange. And their dreams of self-realization affirm the individualist focus of neo-liberal society in which anybody who will work – and dream – hard enough and not give up when the going gets tough will ultimately achieve their goal, without consideration of the structural injustices of the Hollywood production system or of a society that privileges the White, middle-class protagonists. Although Mia sings of the social power of utopia and society's need for these rebel-dreamers that imagine a different world, her and Seb's dreams do not envision an alternative society, and their achievements – satisfactory as they are on the individual level – do not contribute to bringing about a different world. They only add some color, beautiful music, and stories to the world-that-is – which is not an insignificant contribution but not one that would challenge the system itself.

Thus, *La La Land* remains a part of Hollywood's dream factory, simultaneously laying bare that dream as an unachievable illusion and affirming dreaming as an individually and even socially significant human capacity. It echoes, thus, the ambivalence of utopian longing in the tension between the realistic reckoning with the impossibility of its realization and its motivating power and creative drive. The affective charge of Mia's and Seb's dreams, highlighted through the music and dance scenes – the buoyant, optimistic energy of the highway number, the passion of Mia's audition song – and of their realistic acceptance of the need to compromise in the melancholic what-if sequence at the end communicate this ambivalence to the audience, who thus experience themselves as stretched between possibility and limitation, utopia and reality, or, with Rahner, between heaven and earth.

3.2 *Emilia Pérez*: Utopia as Liberation or Oppression?

Although the title of the film puts the trans woman Emilia at the center, it is a film about the utopian dreams and hopes of all three protagonists – Emilia, Rita, and Jessi – to flourish as who they are and live their best lives, free from social constraints and the expectations of others. This dream of the individual good life is embedded in a utopian longing for a better society without sexism, racism, and the corruption and violence caused by drug cartels. While this musical thus considers the interdependence of individual and communal flourishing, it will become clear that, like *La La Land*, its utopia of a healed society stays within the boundaries of existing social structures, those determined by the cartels and the patriarchal disregard of women. The critical reception of the film regarding its representation of trans identities and Mexican society highlights the complex affective intensity created by the musical, which can both attract viewers and repulse them, depending on how the affective economy of the musical interacts with their experiences. The controversial reception of the film thus highlights the importance of considering the hermeneutic context of utopian imaginations emphasized by Flinn and shows the ambivalence of the utopian imagination that can be experienced as oppression or liberation.

The three protagonists share the same utopian longing to live a self-determined life following their own dreams, but what this looks like is different for each. In spite of the film's title, viewers are first introduced to Rita's dream through a dance number with a chorus of cleaning women. After Rita, a lawyer, helped a client to get away with murdering his wife, Rita wonders »How much longer will I hang my head […] will I waste my talent on them?« How much longer will she be complicit with an unjust legal system and a misogynist society that accepts femicide as normal? How much longer will she waste her intelligence and grit to work for a minimal salary, remaining in the background while her boss reaps the rewards for her hard work, only because she is a woman, and she is Black? The chorus of cleaners affirming her stands in for the many other women who share her situation in a sexist, racist society. Thus, accepting a mysterious invitation for a meeting seems like a risk worth taking if it frees her from these constraints. Rita is hired to fake the death of a cartel leader and facilitate surgery to complete her transition so she can live fully as a woman, named Emilia. While this first job for Emilia makes Rita rich and gives her the financial recognition she feels

she deserves, later on, when Emilia founds a charity, Rita joins her again and finally also finds the public professional recognition she had been denied before when Emilia praises her contributions to their work at a gala dinner. Her personal longing to be a mother, however, is realized in a way she would not have wished for when, after Emilia and Jessi, Emilia's ›widow‹, are killed, she takes in their children. As in Mia's and Seb's case, realizing her material, professional, and personal dreams comes at a cost.

Emilia's utopia, while introduced second, is the most prominent in the film and also impacts – positively or negatively – the realization of the other two women's hopes for their lives. Emilia's dream is not to *be* a woman – she has always been one, as is clear when she speaks about Manitas, the name and gender she was assigned at birth, in the third person – but to be socially recognized as a woman. Although she had thoughts of suicide, she insists that »it's not fair to leave without living my real life«. For Emilia, thus, utopian dream and reality are, in a way, inverted: her utopia is to live her reality, her identity as a woman. But in order for this longing to be realized, sacrifices will be needed as well. To keep her wife and children safe, they have to move away and be made to believe that Manitas, their husband and father, truly died. When Emilia later brings them back to live with her in Mexico City, she acts as the children's aunt – a compromise that at least allows her to be a part of their lives. Her dreams seem to be perfectly fulfilled when she meets Epifanía and begins a relationship with her. After their first night together, she sings: »Life without love has been an endless fall«; her complete and integrated sense of self is fulfilled in her relationship with an other: »I was born from her desire«.

Although Emilia's utopian longing for being recognized in her gender identity appears to be individualist, Rita's conversation with the doctor who will perform the gender-affirming surgery highlights that it also has social implications. As their conversation shifts to a quiet song number, the doctor cautions – reflecting a rather problematic body-mind dualism – that his intervention will only remain on the physical level: »You know I only fix the body […] But I will never fix the soul«. His efforts remain limited to the individual: »I fight and fix but I'll never stop the war.« But Rita disagrees: »Changing the body changes society, changing society changes the soul, changing the soul changes society, changing society changes it all.« Rita recognizes the entanglement between individual identity, body, soul, and society: Emilia's

transition is – even if individual – an act of resistance against social transphobia and a step towards the realization of the utopia of a society in which all individuals are able to flourish in their identity, no matter which gender has been assigned to them by society.

The social dimension of utopian longing is further underlined when Emilia decides to use her former connections as a cartel leader to recover the disappeared bodies of cartel victims so that those who died can be remembered and their relatives find closure. Founding her charity can be considered both an attempt at finding redemption for the violence she and her cartel committed, and an act of healing for a society torn by the violence of the cartels. Rhythmic music and vocalization punctuate the stories of torture and death told by the sicarios Rita contacts as Emilia's go-between while we see a montage of short takes of the charity's headquarters being set up, sicarios talking through prison bars, a map identifying the graves, and the clothes of the victims being spread out, illustrating the violence of the cartels and the efforts of the charity. This leads into a melancholic and, at the same time, hopeful song number in which the relatives of victims sing their loss which now finds closure, and former cartel members express their hope to start a new chapter in their lives by working for the charity.

However, Emilia's utopia of a healed society remains limited to treating the symptoms of corruption and violence rather than their causes, and it depends on the social structures shaped by the influence of the cartels. In order to be able to continue her work, she has to take the money of the corrupt elite which benefits more or less directly from the cartels who perpetrate the violence she attempts to undo. In a song and dance number set against the background of Emilia's speech at a fundraising gala, Rita indicts the hypocrisy of the corrupt politicians and judges who are no more than puppets of the cartels and benefit from their violence. The contrast between Rita's more radical utopian hopes of a new society and Emilia's realistic pragmatism is underlined by the contrast between the angry edginess of Rita's hip-hop inspired song and dancing set against the more operatic style of Emilia's speech (fig. 3). It becomes clear that rather than working towards the creation of a new utopian society of peace, flourishing, and justice, Emilia remains mired in the system of crime and violence, as is emphasized even more in the tragic conclusion of the film.

Fig. 3 and 4: *Emilia Pérez* (Jacques Audiard, FR/US/MX 2024), film stills.

Contrasting with the success of Emilia and Rita, who have found their purpose and are recognized for who they are, Jessi remains caught up in the lives and dreams of others, moved around from the US to Mexico to Switzerland and back to Mexico like a piece on a chess board. Fundamentally, her dream is the same as Rita's and Emilia's: to live her own life, to escape from her gilded cage, and to find happiness and love on her own terms (fig. 4). In a song/dance number that starts out as a diegetic song with Gustavo – her former lover with whom she has reunited upon her return to Mexico – in a karaoke bar and then shifts back and forth between Jessi's duet with Gustavo and an extra-diegetic solo with a chorus, Jessi sings: »I want to love myself, to love myself fully, to love myself as I am.« Bathed in pink light, with shots of the karaoke screen that shows her and Gustavo singing on the stage, interlaced with takes of her solo with dancers in the background, the scene's multi-layered construction visualizes the tension she experiences between her con-

fined, artificial existence in a life that has all the comforts money can buy but is defined by others, and her desire to be herself and find happiness on her own terms. But even this dream still seems to be dependent on others: her song about being her authentic self is a duet with Gustavo, and her solo parts, too, are embedded in a group of dancers. Given the artificial setting of the karaoke bar, the pink light, the multiplication of her face on screen, and the extra-diegetic parts of the song, what she imagines as her ›real‹ life appears to be as inauthentic as the life she is living at the moment.

In fact, Jessi is not able to escape from the constraints of her life's entanglement with Emilia's and Gustavo's ambitions. When she announces her decision to marry Gustavo and move to another city, Emilia cannot imagine being separated again from her children and resorts to her former cartel strategies. Gustavo is beaten up and offered money to disappear but, instead, he and Jessi take the children and move out. When Emilia cuts off Jessi's funds, they respond with violence and kidnap Emilia to demand a ransom. As the gunmen Rita called for help assemble their weapons – their synchronized, economic movements choreographed like a dance and the rhythmic clanking of the guns underlining the beat of the soundtrack – it becomes clear that Emilia's attempt to leave behind the violence of her past in the cartel and to start over was unsuccessful. In a sequence that could have been taken from a gangster movie, the attempt to free Emilia fails, and she is shot. Afraid to die, she identifies herself to Jessi. Gustavo puts the two women into his car and tries to escape but, in a struggle with Jessi who wants to get away from him, the car goes over the edge of the street and blows up, killing all three. Emilia's attempt to hold on to her own realized utopia destroys Jessi's dream of a self-determined life, and the sequence of events unfolding as she tries to manipulate Jessi yet again, leads to the destruction of both women's lives and dreams. With this – even if somewhat convoluted – tragic ending of Jessi's and Emilia's utopia, the film highlights the ambivalence of utopia when one person's efforts to realize her ideal impedes or even destroys another person's life and hopes.

This ambivalence of utopian longing is also apparent on the level of the reception of the film's representation of trans identities and Mexican society by these communities in comparison to the critical acclaim it found among the cis-reviewers of the Global North evidenced by the numerous nominations and awards it won at film festivals, although, ultimately, the racist and

Islamophobic comments by lead actress Karla Sofía Gascòn as well as other controversies around the film's production, such as filming a film set in Mexico completely in France, dampened the initial acclaim.

Trans reviewers criticize the stereotypically reductive and unrealistic representation of trans persons and of the process of transitioning, the presence of scenes that imply transphobia and disrespect of trans persons (such as Rita's continued references to Emilia as ›he‹ even after Emilia identifies herself as a woman, or Emilia's song with Epifanía in which she describes herself as half man, half woman), and the implication that transitioning is a moral decision in the narrative's association of Emilia's transition with her repentance for her violent past as cartel leader. This implied moral dimension of Emilia's transition as also one from sinner to saint seems to be confirmed by the final scene in which the statue of a saint – Saint Emilia? – is carried in procession through the streets, with Epifanía leading the mournful chants of the people.

This is not just a matter of accuracy or realism in the film's representation – which one might not even expect in a musical – but the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD)'s summary of the critical points raised by trans reviewers points out that such »inauthentic portrayals of trans people are offensive and even dangerous«[53] given the effects they may have on trans persons in real life and given the hegemonic cis-heteronormativity of Western societies. Thus, for some trans reviewers, the affective intensity of the musical is reversed and rather than being attracted by the film and being folded into its utopian imagining of authentic identity and a healed society, their embodied-affective viewing experiences are marked by discomfort and pain. Reviewer Reanna Cruz says in a conversation about the film: »The entire time I was watching it I had a really weird feeling in my stomach because to me it seemed like the filmmaker was painting trans women as liars.«[54] And reviewer Fran Tirado »took […] three sittings to complete [the film], and each one felt more torturous.«[55] These reviewers' life experiences as trans persons – which might not reflect those of all trans viewers but are significant to their specific experience of the film – interact with the

53 GLAAD, ›Emilia Pérez‹ Is Not Good Trans Representation, glaad.org, 15 November 2024, https://glaad.org/emilia-perez-is-not-good-trans-representation/ [accessed 20 July 2025].

54 Reanna Cruz, quoted in GLAAD, ›Emilia Pérez‹.

55 Fran Tirado, quoted in GLAAD, ›Emilia Pérez‹.

film's representations in a way that creates an affective intensity that repulses them. Their reception of the film shows that the depiction of Emilia's utopian dream and its realization is not experienced by all trans people as a utopia that reflects their own experiences and dreams and that could contribute to a better understanding of trans identity in society and create better conditions for the flourishing of trans persons. Instead, for them, the film represents a cis-heterosexual view of who trans people are and what they should want to realize in their lives,[56] a utopia imposed on them by others that is restrictive and disrespectful of trans persons' lived experience and potentially even furthering transphobic violence.

From the perspective of Mexican critics,[57] the film is a superficial, insensitive representation of drug-related and gender-based violence which is a serious problems in Mexican society and responsible for high numbers of deaths every year.[58] With its beginning with the outline of a Mariachi trio during the opening credits, the film is criticized for the superficial and stereotypical representation of the complexity of Mexican society, reducing it to folklore, poverty, drugs, and violence. Given that only Epifanía is played by a Mexican actress (Adriana Paz), who however has the most marginal role among the four women at the center of the film, and that several scenes show the filmmaker's admitted lack of research about the cultural context of Mexico, it is no surprise that critic Carlos Aguilar opens his review by simply stating: »›Emilia Pérez‹ is not a Mexican film.«[59] Instead, it represents an outsider's reductive idea of how Mexico looks like and thus is not conducive to a careful consideration of the complex reality of Mexican society, including the impact of cartel violence on individuals, its structural aspects, and social movements of resistance against cartels and femicides.

56 Fran Tirado, quoted in GLAAD, ›Emilia Pérez‹.

57 See for an overview of reactions and critical discussion of the film Adriana Santos, ›Emilia Pérez‹ Is All Outline, No Substance, The Latinx Project, 28 January 2025, https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/intervenxions/emilia-perez-review [accessed 20 July 2025].

58 See for details Center for Preventive Action, Criminal Violence in Mexico, Global Conflict Tracker, updated 11 June 2025, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/criminal-violence-mexico [accessed 30 July 2025]; Statista Research Department, Femicide Rates in Mexico from 2017–2024, 10 March 2025, https://www.statista.com/statistics/979065/mexico-number-femicides/ [accessed 30 July 2025].

59 Carlos Aguilar, Emilia Pérez, RogerEbert.com, 1 November 2024, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/emilia-perez-netflix-film-review [accessed 20 July 2025].

As a White cis-woman from the Global North and thus an outsider myself, I do not want to engage in a debate whether and to which degree these critical comments are justified or how the producers explain their choices. The film's genre-defying form which integrates elements of narco and gangster films, melodrama, and social drama into the genre of the musical certainly evokes expectations of social realism that the artificiality and constructedness of the musical genre does not fulfill. Instead, I take the fact that the film caused such widely divergent reactions in its viewers – from critical acclaim to complete rejection – as an indication for the ambivalence of its utopian longing to live a self-determined life, experience happiness in loving relationships, repent and repair past crimes, find social recognition of one's identity and capacities, and heal the effects of crime and violence. Certainly, in the abstract, these are utopian dreams worth defending which the film communicates as attractive and valuable ideals to its viewers through its affective expressiveness – in Rita's defiant song and dance numbers, the both melancholically mournful and cautiously hopeful number with the relatives of cartel victims and former members, and not least in the emotionally charged, tragic ending of Emilia's kidnapping that deprives Emilia and Jessi of finding their utopia. But the concrete shape this longing takes in the stereotypical representations of trans persons and Mexican society or the means that characters use to fulfill their utopia are deeply problematic because they do not contribute to the flourishing of all but, on the contrary, impede the good life of some in favor of that of others who are more powerful. This utopian failure is made concrete for trans reviewers in the negative affects of repulsion and pain the film inscribes into their bodies.

The oppressive dimension of concretely realized utopian models which always remain limited to the perspective of those imagining them and the contexts and experiences that have shaped them, is important to keep in mind, even while acknowledging the liberative importance of utopian longing as a significant dimension of human existence which reflects the capacity of humans and societies to change and grow. The ambivalence of utopia in this tension between human potentiality and failure that the film reflects in its reception points *ex negativo* toward the need for an absolute Other to fulfill the perfect utopia whose precise traits human beings cannot even imagine. From a theological perspective, thus, the musical's failures of imagining a utopia that speaks to the people whose longing it claims to represent can

be read as an expression of the eschatological proviso with which we need to encounter all human attempts at imagining and realizing a perfect utopia: they are an imperfect, at best preliminary version of the new creation for which we hope.

4. Musicals and Transcendental Longing: The Non-Place of Utopia

Both *La La Land* and *Emilia Pérez* are driven by their protagonists' dreams of the good life whose realization the musicals envision. The musicals express and energize utopian longing with their song and dance numbers and through their storytelling centering around the journey towards the fulfillment of their protagonists' utopia, and so they encourage the human striving for what lies beyond the limitations of their everyday reality, to never be satisfied with what they may have achieved. This affirmation of the importance of daring to dream is a significant contribution of musicals to the nourishment of the human capacity to imagine otherwise which lies at the beginning of any attempts to bring about change, to work towards the realization of a better world of solidarity and right relationship with self, other, and – although not addressed in the films – environment. But as utopian as the musical's visions are, they are tempered by a dose of realism because these dreams are only partially fulfilled for Mia and Seb – they achieve their professional dreams but not their romantic ideal – and are even ultimately negated for Emilia and Jessi, who die in the pursuit of theirs. The utopian longing to overcome real constraints remains limited by the conditions of reality and human finitude.

While both films focus on the utopia of individual flourishing, they note the social dimension of utopian longing: dreams of a better life offer an alternative vision of reality, »new colors to see«, as Mia sings, Rita's rebellious songs push for social change, and Emilia's achievement of her utopian dream represents a contribution to a better, more just society in which others might find it easier to follow the path she forged. But as Dyer notes, these utopian visions – even if they include a note of social criticism – remain conditioned by the same social structures against which they react: Mia's and Seb's vision of professional success that can be realized if they just dream

hard enough, even if it requires a choice between love and career, does not challenge capitalist-patriarchal neo-liberalism but rather imagines personal success within its structures, and Emilia's utopia of a healed society without violence is funded through the ill-begotten wealth of those who benefitted from this violence or even perpetrated it in the first place. The musicals' utopias are thus reactionary affirmations of the world-that-is – shaped by capitalism, patriarchy, cis-heteronormativity, the political and cultural hegemony of the Global North – at the same time as they are visions of alternative worlds, reflecting the structural ambivalence of utopian longing. This ambivalence is further illustrated in the reception of *Emilia Pérez* which is experienced as an oppressive utopian vision by trans and Mexican reviewers, emphasizing the dependence of utopias on their hermeneutic context – both social and individual – which determines whether they will be experienced as liberative or oppressive.

From a theological perspective, it is these structural ambivalences and dialectics apparent in the utopian sensibility of musicals – between utopia and reality, longing and frustration, free imagination and constraints, liberation and oppression – that are most interesting to me for what they reveal about the human condition in its relationship with the transcendent, beyond the question of whether the musicals imagine a ›Christian‹ utopia or not. With their affective power that both pulls us into their world (something that might be experienced as enjoyable or disturbing) and renders our own world strange to us, musicals – and art, in general – are able to present our own human condition to us, as Robert Innis writes about the power of artworks: »they give us a heightened sense of being present to something that pulls us out of ourselves and discloses to us the space of our own existence by shattering its taken-for-grantedness.«[60] In the films, the tensions in utopian longing are not so much communicated discursively but inscribed into the bodies of protagonists and viewers through the musicals' affective density in multi-layered and even contradictory experiences of longing, desire, repulsion, disappointment, courage, frustration, nostalgia for the past and hope for the future, pain, or comfort. In sharing these affective intensities, like the protagonists who dream of the impossible, the viewers are reminded of their ability to extend their transcendent imagination and creativity

60 Robert E. Innis, Dimensions of Aesthetic Encounters: Perception, Interpretation, and the Signs of Art, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022, 181.

beyond the limits of what is, and they experience at the same time the boundaries of their capacities of imagining and realizing what they hope for. In this ultimate frustration of their transcendent capacities, though, human beings are not simply left with the recognition of the impossibility of realizing utopia but (may) experience themselves as beings of eschatological hope oriented towards the absolute transcendent who will bring about the impossible in the full realization of utopian longing. Because the utopian sensibility of musicals is a feeling, as Dyer notes, their offer of the experiential realization of the human capacity for relationship with the absolute Other as the one in whom we place our hope for a new creation is an open invitation but not a required response or a definitive statement about the nature of the transcendent. In the encounter with the affectively charged utopian imagination of musicals, in the tension between utopia as the good place and the non-place, viewers experience in a heightened intensity the conditions of their existence precisely in this paradox which enables them to reach for the transcendent and live in hope of fully realized existence in relationship with God while already partially expressing this relationship in how they realize their everyday life here and now.

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