

Chapter 1

The ›Profane‹ Ecstasy of Saint Teresa

Reconsidering ›Sacred‹ Art and the Spiritual Significance of Aesthetic Experience

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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, Bedford: 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 oeuvre 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 immersion²³ 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 body²⁶ 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's 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 ancien 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 d'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].

reactions⁴² 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 oeuvre, 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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