

Article

Beyond Theological Aesthetics: Aesthetic Theology

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Abstract: In this text, I explore what I have termed “aesthetic theology”. After noting the transference of religious content, function, etc., to art in Modernity, an act that has made art a locus theologicus once again, I analyse one of the main consequences of this phenomenon: art is progressively being considered through what was once purely theological categories, thus giving rise to aesthetic theology. The implication is that some of the solutions that have arisen from the theological debate might be useful in the philosophy of art. I also suggest that aesthetic theology can provide theology with a generalized way of reasoning based on aesthetic judgments—judgements formed by postulated consensus instead of forced judgements formed on conceptual grounds. I defend that the formulation of religious judgement has always been of the former sort, such that aesthetic theology may prove itself a useful tool for theologians in developing their thinking about, depiction of, representing, or approaching God.

Keywords: aesthetic theology; aesthetic judgment; art; religion

1. Introduction

Most modern and contemporary philosophers of art, especially those of the Continental tradition, agree that artworks can make present some aspects of reality that would otherwise be unrepresentable. Aesthetic ideas, what Kant referred to as the constitutive element of the work of art crafted by the genius (Kant 1987), both disclose and veil, i.e., reveal a partial content that refers to that which lies beyond itself. Furthermore, Neoplatonic thinkers, or even Phenomenologists, would say that the artwork reveals the radiance hidden beneath the apparent evidence of the visible. Correspondingly, the aesthetic experience of the work of art may be said to be eminently contemplative in a deeply religious sense. It involves a radical openness to what is experienced and the opening up to something beyond the appearance of the phenomenon. Some authors have interpreted this feature of the artwork as a possibility of resisting that impulse to control and subdue all what is real in general and the divine in particular, by means of a reductive and encapsulating way of understanding that which exists; an impulse that is widely supposed to be the inclination of positivistic approaches to the real. For this reason, many theologians have appealed to the revelatory value of art and to its indispensable role in the development of a complete and accomplished religious form of life.

Iris Murdoch, for example, has written about how some Christian doctrines have been so embellished in paintings that painters seem to have become the ultimate authorities in those doctrines. This is similar to how Plato regarded the relationship between poets and the Greek gods (Murdoch 1977, p. 70), but Murdoch is thinking particularly of Christian representations of the Trinity. Rublev seems to have done more than centuries of metaphysical arguments in favour of the “intelligibility” of this dogma, exactly as the aesthetic representations (e.g., music, dance, song . . .) of the eschatological blessing and the torments of hell seem to have done for the dogmatic understanding of the novissima. Painting or poetic composition seem to be a more accurate medium, and have even opened the path to subsequent conceptualization: Dante’s eschatological view as depicted in *The Divine Comedy* deeply influences not only art, but also post-Dantean theological thinking. The devotion to the Virgin Mary, which had been substantiated in the arts long before



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dogmatics, is another example of this. Moreover, these artistic representations refrain from either exhausting or misrepresenting the dogma.

In light of the cases in which art precedes theology (and in some occasions exceeds it) and images herald concepts, one must consider the many artistic depictions of theological concepts which have maintained their theological force even once their theological origins became somewhat blurred. The 19th-century American landscape paintings were intended as “painted theology”, and depicted nature as a secondary Scripture in that it reveals God’s power and sublimity (Novak 1980). Today, these paintings retain part of their religious intention; however, their sublimity is decidedly more “secular”. Music, too, is an artform long understood to be a locus theologicus, whether in the sense of the Lutheran “*predicatio sonora*”, or the general Christian understanding of music as not just a vehicle for revealed text, but as an agency that can afford us a glint of God’s beauty; as something able to reveal truths that cannot be properly expressed in words. This is the case in Karl Barth’s interpretation of Mozart (Barth 2003), and Gerardus van der Leeuw’s study of Bach (van der Leeuw 1963).

Traditionally, there have been two different ways of approaching the divine that fall under what we would today call “aesthetic” categories. The first is through art qua art, whether beautiful or not, and understood as a non-reductive way of reaching the real. Stripping art of any sort of aesthetic reduction—i.e., the narrowing of art as something to be contemplated in order to get a “purely aesthetic” experience—provides us with a specific form of knowledge (Gadamer 2004, 70 ff.), one that may be characterized in some instances as knowledge of the divine. The other aesthetic approach is through beauty itself. Developed mainly in the Neoplatonic tradition (Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysus, Aquinas, the Florentine Neoplatonism, etc.). The aesthetic arguments for the existence of God—from the inferences that arise from natural beauty, as proposed by Joseph Addison, to Kant’s acknowledgment that the contemplation of natural beauty is as close to the Argument from Design as we shall ever come, to F. R. Tennant’s aesthetic proofs for the existence of God (Tennant 1930)—, are all based on the conviction of the “revelatory” character of beauty. For these philosophers and theologians, beauty offers something less than justification, but produces something more than hope (Neiman 2015, p. 303).

There is also a typically modern and contemporary way of relating art, theology, and religion, the “Aesthetic theology”. As the spaces of the religious and the artistic began to overlap, to the point that many of the elements traditionally considered the typical domain of religion came to be seen as essential and proper constituents of art, many authors have begun to understand the latter by means of theological categories. This is the core of Aesthetic theology. Among these theorists, Arthur C. Danto may be the paradigmatic example, although not the only one.

In this paper I intend to remark upon this intimate relationship between art and religion, and, for that matter, between art theory and theology. Thus, I will not explore *how* art and religion relate, but will instead assume that art and religion relate in order to elucidate this latter assumption further in three points. First, I will establish the provenance of the intimate nature of this relationship. Second, I will show how this fact has made the emergence of an Aesthetic theology possible, a new way of thinking about art in which terms, concepts, and modes of theological thought are assumed as natural devices. Finally, I will propose the development of some suggestions of Aesthetic theology based on the analysis of the judgment of taste. To my mind, this will facilitate reimagining the ways in which we access the divine.

2. The Structural Unity of Art and Religion as a Key Element for the Development of an Aesthetic Theology

“Alma” is the popular name of the representation of the goddess Athena that is the symbol of Columbia University, and is derived from the Latin, *Alma Mater*. On the back of the statue, rather hidden away and not easy to appreciate, we find the motto of the University: “*lumine tuo videbimus lumen*”. The arcane language in which it is written

and the concealed location allow us to infer that very few people will have paid attention to the inscription. Even so, someone who has even rudiments of Latin might stop by to take a picture, in which case this person might attribute the “*lumine tuo*” either to Alma, as the incarnation of the university, or to the university itself, which could be seen as an entity that grants the light of understanding. The original reference, however, is Psalm 36: 10. For a learned man of the eighteenth century, when this university was founded, the “*lumen*” of the motto would refer him immediately to God, whose light makes it possible to “see” all other light. Being aware of that reference was part of the culture at that time, but no longer. Of the handful of people who could understand the Latin inscription, whether they be students or visitors, or even academics, most would probably take away the aforementioned secular interpretation: the university is the source of that light because it is the vehicle by which one acquires knowledge. The religious element has been replaced with the secular, and yet the motto works perfectly well. The referents are different, but the discourse is equally valid under the new parameters in the new secular paradigm, even though it is interpreted under completely different prejudices. This transmutation is the key element of what I am calling “Aesthetic theology”, to wit, the shifting of spaces of the religious and the artistic, the deposit of some of the elements of religion into art and eventually the understanding of art through theological categories. This is possible because art and religion are deeply similar in some aspects.

Art and religion show similarities not only in their content—that which led Hegel to speak of “the religion of art”—but also in their structure. Paul Oscar Kristeller (1951, 1952) sustains that prior to the 18th century, before art and religion split into two completely different cultural spaces, there had existed a centuries-long intrinsic togetherness between them. What is John of the Cross’ *Spiritual Canticle*? Is it a “work of art” or a religious profession of faith? Is Tomás Luis de Victoria’s *Officium defunctorum* a musical piece or a beautiful prayer for the souls of the departed? How can one decide between these two apparently incompatible choices? There is nothing perceptible in the “work” or “prayer” as such that forces us to conclude one way or another. A “concert” may take place in a church; a “religious rite” might occur in the woods or in the deceased’s home, or even in a public space, such as in the case of the funeral of a famous person. Today, some consider Victoria and Saint John mystics. That would make them akin to Saint Theresa, Meister Eckhart, or maybe even Thomas Merton. They fall under the “mystic” category that both allows and forces us to understand them within the same context. In so doing, some features and characteristics of their music and poetry are highlighted, while others are obfuscated. Their poetic or musical pieces opens one to a new understanding of the world and open themselves up to the world. Those who consider them to be “artists” instead would place them in the same category as Velázquez, Andy Warhol, or Ai Weiwei. They are thereby introduced into a cultural construct known as the “artworld”. This description of them as “artists” allows us to make a purely formalist listening to or reading of their pieces.

This sort of formalism is common today. One can visit the priory of San Marco, in Florence, where Fra Angelico painted the friar’s cells with the same attitude and mindset as when one visits the local museum of art. However, Fra Angelico did not paint these walls for the aesthetic delectation of tourists, but for the friars living within them, so that these images were for them a memorial of the tradition they belonged to, and also an icon for them to pray before. He painted them as an element of a religious form of life. In this sense, both his paintings and the friar’s prayers can be understood as religious acts. This same phenomenon is seen in Bach’s *Little Organ Book (Orgelbüchlein)*, which is a set of choral preludes beginning with this text: “For the glory of the most high God alone. And for my neighbour to learn from”. It is both a pedagogical treatise and a musical book for religious worship, composed by Bach to teach his students organ technique as well as to be an important part of the liturgical service. To some scholars, it is also musical theology. What were to happen if one were to do away with all the theological and liturgical elements that form part of these choral preludes? What if one were to, for example, just note the catalogue number of the prelude and disregard the title that situates it within the liturgical

cycle? There would be an evident and noticeable change in the way one perceives and understands a choral prelude if it were referred to as “Herr Jesus Christus der ein’ge Gottes Sohn” that if it were referred to as “BWV 601”.

Of course, mere formalist or “aesthetic” reading of such works is possible. It may be said to be the current norm. In adopting this “artistic” point of view focused on formal elements, or maybe on the emotion that good music arouses in all of us, or on the aesthetic properties that this music might have, we set aside other elements. But is it right to say that performing or listening to one of these chorales is not (also) a religious act in itself? In any case, a problematic way of thinking about this is considering these paintings, musical compositions and so on to be mere “artistic actions” utilized by religion to embellish itself. In the examples I have presented, the artistic creations were not something that could occur outside religious life. They were not something that religion borrowed in order to aestheticize itself. They were, on the contrary, an intrinsic part of the same religious life that inspired their creation. And so, the better way to think of these “artistic actions” is to consider them as a religious act as such. However, this begs the question, if we were to rid ourselves of the constitutive religious elements of these works, will its intrinsic value remain the same? (Neill and Ridley 2010) Conversely, is a purely aesthetic response to one of Bach’s choral preludes an incorrect response? It may be that, as Goehr says, Bach did not compose works of art (Goehr 2007), but this does not mean that he did not compose what we later called “works”, it only means he did not pretend to compose them, precisely because in creating his music he was thinking in very different terms; quite possibly in very different terms of what we today deem “art”.

There is no actual perceptible difference between an “artistic painting” displayed in a museum and a “religious icon” located in a church. Even the languages used to understand artistic and religious realities are often interchangeable. Sometimes it is just a question of shifting perspectives in order to make it possible for one to consider something a religious reality or an artistic one. We adopt one perspective or the other in virtue of some theoretical, contextual, and institutional elements. If one were to go to any museum and attempt to pray before an image of Christ or any other religious painting, one would probably be kindly asked to leave. Were the prayer presented as some sort of artistic performance, perhaps it would be more acceptable, considering it is an artistic space. The fact is that by the mere fact of being displayed on the wall of a museum, the religious icon has become a work of art, and so it will admit and demand different descriptions and predicates. But it has not been always like that.

The question of something being either art or religion only arises naturally once art and religion become two radically different and separated realms. After the separation, art takes over many of the religious functions as well as the ways of articulating societal and individual ethos. From 18th c. onwards a whole religious system of concepts, practices, and institutions related to the production of artefacts is substituted by another, the artworld, which will expand its limits until its boundaries will become blurred and almost anything could fall under the category of art. New institutions and disciplines constitute this new space (history of art, museums, art criticism, cultivated audiences, art market, the philosophical discipline of Aesthetics, etc.), and a new character, the artist, endowed with features of originality, inspiration, imagination, creativity, etc., absent from the artisan will take centre stage. By the same token, the aesthetic character of any artefact will be differentiated from its instrumental usage. This fact will make it possible, through the progressive sophistication of the idea of taste, to reduce the aesthetic attitude to a merely contemplative, intellectual and quasi-sacred attitude; a disinterested contemplation that recalls the sort before believed only to be owed to God (Shiner 2011; Glauser 2002; Abrams 1981). More and more, the “work” of art—a new generic term that substitutes the old ones of piece, sculpture, painting, etc.—understood as a closed entity, will become a sort of fixed archetype that judges the rightness of a performance or an interpretation, demands fidelity, and exists independently from the specific occasion of its production or its original purpose (Goehr 2007). The artefact’s life-world is wiped out, and the piece, divested of any

possible religious, political, civic, functional, etc., aspects, is thrown into a space where it is surrounded by “works of art in general”. Its natural environment is now supposed to be just a purely “artistic” atmosphere. Part of this process, begun in the 18th c., continues to involve that the essence of an artwork must be exclusively identified with the representation of beauty. This is no longer a divine sort of Beauty, however, but the artistic property of beauty. The “aesthetic” artwork shapes its own world. Its beauty is *its* beauty, independent of anything else. As Lessing states in his *Laocoon* (Lessing 1887), artwork that serves not beauty, but some other purpose, cannot properly be considered art. “Meaningful” art would henceforth be considered auxiliary art at best.

Before this sort of aesthetic consciousness was formed and the modern concept of “art” was created, people were surrounded by artefacts that fulfilled a function that could be understood by anyone belonging to the tradition in which they were produced. The image of the god that presided over an ancient temple was not an artwork to be aesthetically contemplated in the modern sense, but a basic part of a world in which the temple, inhabited by the god, made a specific form of religious expression possible and which contained within it the same world of religious experience from which it arose (Gadamer 2004, XXVII; Heidegger 2002b). In this religious context, art it is not just “art”, but an indispensable element of that form of life. Simone Weil wrote: “A Gregorian melody is as powerful a witness as the death of a martyr” (Weil 2002, p. 151). “Religion” is, therefore, not just a genus that classifies the different religions as species. Religion is instead a form of life that comprises ways of dressing and eating, relating to others, creating models of family and society, observing rituals and festivities, producing calendars, committing to delineated values, crafting artifacts, establishing spaces of self-criticism, as well as, of course, an expression of specific belief. Pointing out the strictly cognitive dimensions of religion as the fundamental indicator of religious identity would be to both ignore its broad practical context, and to impose a homogeneity among its members over space and time, which simply does not exist (Ferguson 2009, p. 18). Religion does not belong to just the subjective space of the individual, but also to the objective spirit, in which social practices are institutionalized. Just like art and other cultural realities, religion can be considered as a “second nature”, as Ortega y Gasset and Joseph Margolis would have it; historically evolving and embodied in the natural world, even though it cannot be accurately described by using a vocabulary restricted to giving an account of the material world. In this sense, what we currently refer to as “art” is an indispensable constitutive of a religious form of life.

The dawn of modernity brought, among other things, an end to the medieval concept of transcendental realities, i.e., realities that “transcend” any attempt to reduce them to a unique way of being (and of being understood and categorized). The modern world becomes a “categorical” world, where allegedly nothing can be more than one thing: as concerns us here, something can be either art or religion, never both. Everything is understood according to the *aut . . . aut* dilemmatic description, making it imperative to find a particular category within which to situate any given reality. The idea that something can be *et . . . et* is not only lost to us, but regarded as a failure of our classification system. Art becomes an autonomous realm of artworks and nothing else. However, this ideation brings with it the consequence that the very concept of “religion” would change its meaning. Currently, many authors present the cognitive elements, and only these, as the defining features of a specific religious identity. This involves leaving aside many constitutive elements of a religion (Smart 1998), including the aesthetic/artistic ones. By doing so, religion is reduced to being a more or less rational assent to a set of beliefs. However, no thinker from antiquity would have been able to, or would even have wanted to attempt to separate the aesthetic quality of the objects from their place in their world. Neither would the attempt have been made to use that aesthetic quality as a criterion to group similar objects together under a Fine Arts category, or to turn them into a matter of philosophical interpretation (Kristeller 1951, p. 506). It would have occurred to no one that painting a Crucifixion scene was not a sort of religious act in itself, one of the many sorts of

“charismas” that describes religious life. In order to bring about a change of consciousness it was necessary to reconfigure the appreciation of the piece in strictly aesthetic terms (as an artwork), as well as to present this way of accessing the artefact as superior to any other.

Under this aesthetic paradigm, Art (now with a capital A) has been hypertrophied until it has almost become some new form of religion, perhaps one that is more acceptable to modern people. Many 19th c. philosophers constantly insist on this idea (Bowie 2003). Art promises to provide the same sort of meaning that humankind sought from traditional religion, that, perhaps because it is now something from which “art” has been completely alienated, religion cannot provide anymore. In the era of “the eclipse of the sacred” and “the withdrawal of the divine” (Ferry 1990, p. 45), Art is a substitute religion. It no longer forms part of religious life, but is instead an Ersatzreligion, assuming part of the contents formerly constituting religion to become *the* modern-day religion, and the only form of worship deemed appropriate for this new era. Artists become priests, museums become temples, artistic rituals evoke charismatic spaces, theorists become prophets, the religious aura becomes an artistic property, and, finally, the controversies surrounding whether something “is art” or not become the stuff of authentic theological debates that not only depend on theological concepts, but that will lead to the establishing of orthodoxies and heterodoxies that will help to create artistic traditions and communities.

As an example, the German artist Gerhard Richter wrote in 1964–1965: “Art is not a substitute religion: it is a religion (in the true sense of the word: ‘binding back’, ‘binding’ to the unknowable, transcending reason, transcendent being). This does not mean that art has turned into something like the Church and taken over its function (. . .). But the Church is no longer adequate as a means of affording experience of the transcendental, and of making religion real—and so art has been transformed from a means into the sole provider of religion: which means religion itself” (Richter 2003, p. 759).¹ Both Terry Eagleton (2015) and George Steiner (2004) have largely reflected on this phenomenon of creating “substitute theologies” or searching for “a viceroy for God”. This process has slowly percolated since the 18th c. The last step in this progression is for the theory of art to assume the theological vocabulary and conceptual armoury of religion for aesthetic theology to have its beginning.

3. Aesthetic Theology

Carl Schmitt begins his famous text “Political Theology” with the statement that “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” (Schmitt 2005, p. 36). These basic concepts have been borrowed from theology and inserted into political theory. The omnipotent God has become the omnipotent lawgiver, God’s law is now positive law, the miracle is the exception in jurisprudence, etc. These concepts connect to one another via a network that becomes incomprehensible if we forget their theological ancestry. In this new context, some thinkers raise philosophical questions that theology had taken on long ago; but in doing so, they reshape these problems for the modern era. This phenomenon of secularized translation occurs in aesthetics and the theory of art as well. The vast majority of the basic concepts that make up modern theory of art are actually secularized theological concepts. The ontological discourse about the work of art, the reflection on the aesthetic experience, the account of the creative process as well as the role of institutions in producing an artworld, among other major issues, still have theological profiles, although their proponents may not necessarily be aware of this fact (Castro 2018).

Currently, many contemporary philosophers of art do not limit themselves to applying analogies and religious examples in their arguments, nor do they think of art in religious terms; however, they freely make use of the whole armoury of theological concepts, theories, and doctrines in order to develop their theories of art, that is, they produce an Aesthetic theology. This new phenomenon is not to be confused with “Theological aesthetics”, which is an explicitly theological way of thinking about art in order to create a theology of art, as well as a theology of beauty. Several contemporary authors, such as Von Balthasar, have reflected on the fact that aesthetics and theology, as attempts to understand beauty, art,

and God (and everything that is ordered to God, in the Thomist account), converge in a reflection on the reality of the divine from the point of view of the aesthetic categories. Nevertheless, Aesthetic theology is not Theological aesthetics, but a reflection on art comprised of theological concepts and theological modes of reasoning². Clearly, all of philosophy of art cannot be considered an Aesthetic theology, but there are enough elements in many of the great contemporary theorists to support the idea that there has been a theological turn in the present-day philosophy of art. This is not due to the fact that the latter has reflected upon theological topics (as is said to be the case in the theological twist of French phenomenology), but because, as I am proposing, its way of conceptualizing non-theological realities is characteristically theological. A typical example of this is the work of Arthur C. Danto (1924–2013), who was professor of philosophy at Columbia University and is said to be the most important philosopher of art in the Anglo-American tradition in the second half of the twentieth century.

Danto's main work, entitled "*The Transfiguration of the Common Place*", is a work in which he puts forth the ontology of the work of art (Danto 1983). In it, he aims to show that between things that are art and things that are not art there is an ontological difference, but not necessarily a perceptually discernible distinction. In this text, Danto uses a series of typically theological concepts such as transubstantiation and transfiguration. In later works, he adopts an eschatological approach to support his philosophy of the history of art (Castro 2017). All these theoretical devices, freed from their transcendent references, allow him to create a theory of the work of art in particular, and of the artworld in general. It is nonetheless the case that Danto did not intend to use theology to build his theory of art. On the contrary, it is precisely the fact that he does so unintentionally that confirms the idea that we have reached a particularly significant moment in the process of secular art "occupying" the religious space I described above. It is at this moment that questions related to God and questions related to art are thought about via one and the same categories, that is, purely theological ones. The theoretical element developed to think about the divine (that is, theology) is now applied to the work of art. The term "artheology" could be used to describe this phenomenon, but it does not seem like a term that would allow itself to be coined with ease. Seeking inspiration from Schmitt, one might call it "Aesthetic theology" instead. It is, in a way, a sort of revenge that theology takes on those who believe that its time is over and done with.

Danto's main idea in philosophy of art is that what makes something a work of art is not something the eye can descry. We have to look for the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a work of art somewhere else. The idea that we could instantly recognize something as being art by perceptive means ceased to be applicable the moment works of art started to look exactly like ordinary things. So already Danto's early formulations of his philosophy of art invoke theological references related to this indiscernibility. A case in point is the idea of "Transfiguration", which he will develop for the first time in his *The Artworld* (1964). In this text, Danto's argument to explain the "double citizenship" of artwork runs along the lines that Augustine's theology of history, as depicted in the latter's *The City of God*, does. Just as there is no discernible difference between the citizens of the two Augustinian cities, there is no need for different appearances between works of art and everyday objects (Danto 1964, p. 582). He exemplifies this thesis throughout this text by means of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*: Why are they works of art, if they are indiscernible from the banal and ordinary soap boxes created by James Harvey as a piece of industrial design, which anyone can buy in the supermarket? In later works, Danto will take on a third indiscernible artwork created by Mike Bidlo, entitled *No Andy Warhol Brillo Boxes*. There are no discernible differences between Harvey, Warhol, or Bidlo's works, but two of them are works of art and one is not. There is nothing the eye can grasp to account for this difference, i.e., between works of art and a banal object, and between a work of art and another one.

Danto thinks this indiscernibility is not just an issue for philosophy of art, but it is one of the main questions in the history of philosophy, and recurs in most philosophi-

cal branches: metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy, etc. (Danto 1986, p. 170). Descartes's reflections on the lack of internal marks to distinguish between dreaming and waking, Kant's distinction between a moral action and one that is perceptually indiscernible, but not moral, Heidegger's differentiation between authentic and inauthentic existence (Danto 1997, p. 35) ... all of these are philosophical investigations on the question of indiscernibility. The question of the indiscernible is clearly a philosophic topic, but it is a theological one as well. Even though Danto does not explicitly reflect on that fact, he works with the assumption that indiscernibility is also a theological device, as his concern with theological examples and concepts shows. In his book devoted to Andy Warhol, a later work, he explicitly claims that the question of the difference between two exactly alike things, one of which is art and one of which is not, is similar to "a religious question" that has to do with the fact that there has to be a difference between a man that is a god, and a man that is not (Danto 2009, p. 23). But there is, in fact, no perceptible difference. The example he gives is the following: "imagine that there was a man just [Jesus'] age in Jerusalem, who looked enough like Jesus that the two were often confused for one another, even by those who knew them well. The difference could not have been more momentous than that! Confusing a god with a mere human being is, *toutes proportions gardées*, like confusing a work of art with a mere real thing—a thing defined through its meaning with a thing defined through its use" (Danto 2009, p. 137).

Danto will develop this analogy between art and religion by adopting the term "transfiguration" from theology, but he explicitly asserts that the idea derives from the Catholic concept of "transubstantiation". Danto is not theologically rigorous at all. He does not intend to use theology as an auxiliary discipline for his development of art theory. On the contrary, he is doing an Aesthetic theology without the burden of having been faithful to the orthodoxies of a theological system; i.e., he is just using theological concepts to think about art, not doing any kind of theology of art. That is the reason why, in some other places, Danto consciously and explicitly selects "transfiguration" rather than "transubstantiation", (Danto 1992, p. 137; Castro 2022) even though this latter concept seems *prima facie* much more effective for achieving his theoretical goal. This lack of theological precision is a constant in Danto's work, and on some occasions, it will lead him to a philosophical cul-de-sac.

In order to develop his thesis, Danto adopts this definition of transfiguration: "transfiguration is a religious concept. It means the adoration of the ordinary, as in its original appearance in the Gospel of Saint Matthew it meant adoring a man as a god" (sic) (Danto 1997, pp. 128–29). Similarly, Pop art (remember Warhol's *Brillo Box*) transfigures commonplace things that are meaningful for people, by raising them to the status of high art, as the apostles did, according to Danto, when they adored "a man as a god". But the idea of transfiguration, as it is presented in the Gospels whence Danto takes inspiration,³ involves a metamorphosis, some visible change that allows the disciples to do what Danto claims they do—adore a man as a god. This seems, however, to be against Danto's main idea that specific appearance should not be considered a necessary condition for something to be deemed a work of art. What about the other theological term, "transubstantiation", expressly rejected by Danto? Transubstantiation is the concept used in Catholic theology to explain what happens in the sacrament of Eucharist. This concept has less to do with how things look than with how things "are". It requires an ontological change that a priori precludes any perceptible difference. When we are in the presence of transubstantiated realities, we do not see any difference between them and their corresponding not-transubstantiated realities. It seems this term would be much more useful to explain that the difference between Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and the commercial ones is, to some extent, akin to the difference between bread and wine and the Body and Blood of Christ, *toutes proportions gardées*.

Even though Danto explicitly rejects the term "transfiguration"—though he never provides a clear reason why—on many occasions he refers to the conceptual meaning of transubstantiation when using the expression "transfiguration", and mixes up, in a

somewhat indiscriminate manner, the different doctrines developed through the centuries to describe what it means for something to become the Body and Blood of Christ. Sometimes he seems to be closer to Zwingli's approach, according to which the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Eucharist has to be understood symbolically (saying "this is the Body of Christ" amounts to saying "this means, represents, symbolizes . . ."). One can clearly see a Zwinglian approach in Danto's theoretical device of "the 'is' of artistic identification" (Danto 1964, p. 576; 1983, p. 126), that one must master in order to see a trait in a painting as a specific artistic character. If one cannot master "the 'is' of religious identification" one will only be able to see bread and wine, and not the Body and Blood of Christ. With the right "theory" one can see symbolically, as it were. In Danto's case, this "theory" is composed not only of explicit theories of art, but also the theory that the history of art manifests embodied in the works of art. An uninitiated person, someone ignorant of the artworld in the 1960s in the West, would be unable to see Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* as art. In the same way, someone visiting from some uncharted region in which there is bread and wine, but no Christian tradition, would be unable to experience these things as Body and Blood.

This "is of artistic identification" is, according to Danto, consistent with the literal falsehood of the identification, as it is the case of the Zwinglian approach to the species. The "is of religious identification" understood in the Zwinglian sense claims that the bread is (signifies) the Body, but is literally bread. Danto says that the "is of artistic identification" resembles metaphorical identification (Juliet is the sun), but differs from (a) magic identification (a doll is an enemy who will feel a pin-stick), (b) mythical identification (the sun is Phoebus' chariot), and (c) religious identification (the bread and the wine are the Body and Blood of Christ). In all these cases, literal falsity is inconceivable" (Danto 1983, p. 126). Here, Danto seems to leave the Zwinglian understanding of the "is", where that "literal" falsity is assumed in its symbolic reading, to adopt the Catholic one, in which the transubstantiation makes it absurd to speak of literal falsity. He moves indistinctly, without giving it much thought, between these two theological approaches: the symbolic and the "Catholic", between Zwingli and Aquinas. As one commenter puts it: "Clear as he often was, Danto seldom let narrow exactitude mar a good line" (Soucek 2014).

But the Catholic approach is ultimately not a good fit. Transubstantiation does not connote new substance manifesting from the old, like some sort of chemical or alchemical reaction. It is instead the conversion of one physical reality into another *which already exists* (i.e., the living Jesus Christ) (Anscombe 1981). It is not easy to make sense of this within Danto's parameters. Furthermore, Danto never provides a transubstantiative "procedure", because that would take him too close to George Dickie's Institutional Theory. The Institutional Theory—another example of Aesthetic theology—is the interpretation that Dickie offered of Danto's artworld, understood as an institution that resembles a Church. In order to explain how something becomes a work of art, Dickie expressly refers to a sacramental model (baptism/marriage), in which a candidate is presented to an institution (the artworld) that embodies a historical tradition, in order to be admitted as part of it (Dickie 1997). Danto's main thesis is just that transfiguration is carried out by means of a constitutive interpretation, not by any kind of institution or procedure. At some point Danto, despite criticizing Dickie for claiming this, says that "interpretation is something like baptism, not in the sense of giving a name, but a new identity, participation in the community of the elect" (Danto 1983, p. 126).

In spite of this, and in spite of navigating in the midst of all this theoretical and dogmatic vagueness, it seems easy to elaborate upon Danto's Aesthetic theology by using the schema of Catholic Sacramental Theology; specifically, by taking the constitutive interpretation that Danto defends to be the "form" of the sacrament. Without the form, Augustine says, water is just water. In this interpretation, it follows that without the constitutive artistic interpretation, the object is just a banal object. This allows us to interpret Danto's artworld as the deposit of the tradition that nurtures the artistic faith, i.e., as the space that provides the needed background for the intention of the artist to create a work of art. Furthermore, the artworld is the basic premise of those intentional accounts of

the work of art, which demand some kind of artistic intention as a necessary precondition for something to be regarded as being art. It seems that in order to produce a work of art, one needs to have the intention of doing what the artworld does. The artworld is the instance that provides this “institutional intention”. But what the artworld, as such, intends is not clear at all. By contrast, in Catholic theology intention is both clearly delineated and necessary for the validity of the sacrament. Catholic dogmatics emphasize the intention of the priest acting on behalf of the Church in order for the religious act to bring about its effect.⁴ That intention is expressed through the words pronounced in every sacrament (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* III, q.64, a.9). So, the minister has to be aware, to some extent, of what the Church intends in the celebration of the sacrament, otherwise it will not be valid. That is exactly the model George Dickie develops. The debate between Danto and Dickie is, ultimately, an ecclesiological quarrel between two ways of understanding what the artworld is: either an institutional church with powers to confer statutes, or a spiritual community of shared conceptions and interpretations guided just by some sort of Hegelian Absolute spirit.

Danto’s philosophy of art is just an example of this contemporary trend of using theological concepts and reproducing theological arguments to build a theory of art. There are many others. Most of the philosophical models about the “creation” of a work of art resemble the different theological doctrines about divine creation; the idea of the artist as a “genius” is a secularization of the nominalist God, and the discussion about whether the artist must follow rules or whether these are an obstacle to creativity is analogous to the debate between realists and nominalists in medieval thought with respect to divine omnipotence. Theological arguments are also present in the debates on how to interpret a work of art, and in those that explore the role of the author in that interpretation, etc. Danto is, however, a one example of many who take a theological turn.

4. A Development of Aesthetic Theology: The Theological Judgment as a Sort of Aesthetic Judgment

Having established common ground between aesthetics and theology, it is now possible to develop some potentialities of the Aesthetic theology by moving now from “pure” aesthetics to “pure” theology. Theological judgments could feasibly be based on the Kantian judgment of taste. This judgment, in Kantian philosophy, is a space of a priori certainties, where we contemplate the pure form of our knowledge, its very conditions of possibility. In this judgment, the cognitive faculties, in the act of knowing, renounce their object and simply “contemplate” how their structure seems to adapt to the understanding of the real (Kant 1987; Eagleton 1990). In the judgment of taste, the subject becomes aware of the fact their faculties are harmonized a priori with the real, as the contemplation of the beautiful reveals, and that at the same time they are overcome by the real, as the contemplation of the sublime shows. The subject’s relationship to what is there comes to the forefront. To judge that nature is beautiful, in Kantian philosophy, is to feel a satisfaction that Susan Neiman interprets in these quasi-theological terms: “if I had made the world, I would have done it just like that”. And to judge that nature is sublime is to be aware that there is something beyond our capacities: “however much greater I imagine my creative powers, they would never suffice to do *that*” (Neiman 2015, p. 83).

The aesthetic access to the real, like the theological perspective, assures that the real is not indifferent to us, but is adapted to our cognitive faculties, which freely play according to the Kantian account of the aesthetic judgement. We understand this not through the pragmatic efficacy of our concepts, but through the fruitive character that derives from the free play of the faculties. Aesthetic experience places before ourselves the pure form of experience, and makes us conscious of pure experience, *ut talis*, free of desires and urges. This clear awareness, the formidable, sometimes intoxicating, sometimes repugnant or maddening fact that *I exist* (Maritain 1978), opens us to the experiences that typically arise within the religious and aesthetic complexes, those that are rooted in the mystery of the fact of existing, in the Wittgensteinian “mystical” (that the world is, not what it is).

The structure of the judgment of taste, which presupposes a kind of a priori agreement, as if everyone should like what one likes without it being possible to establish a conceptual basis of obligation to force that judgment, is similar to the structure of the religious judgment, in which the same a priori agreement in beliefs is intended, without it being possible to force agreement. It is a judgment in which humanity in general is present as a single judging body, which implies putting aside one's own individual interests and prejudices and assuming in oneself the interests of a universal and common humanity. Kant shows that, although the judgment of taste is not conceptual, it has all the conditions of possibility of conceptual and rational judgment, by virtue of the fact that it implies that free play of the faculties involved in our standard cognitive processes. In a certain way, even if Kant himself did not develop this path, it implies a certain pre-predicative experience. It is an experience that both natural beauty and the work of art provide us with, which is neither methodical knowledge nor a comprehension completely translatable into demonstrable maxims. However, it is nonetheless an experience that the real is fundamentally pleasurable, adapted to our faculties, and, in that sense, also good, which is one of the fundamental convictions of many religious traditions and very clearly of the Judeo-Christian one. Actually, the strictly aesthetic apprehension of the real provides us with a certainty that goes beyond the space of the cognitive as Kant contemplated it, always subject to the scandal of scepticism. The free play of faculties that constitutes the structure of the aesthetic judgment postulates that the agreement, unity, and certainty that is denied to us in the epistemic realm is indeed a fact in the aesthetic realm.

This way of approaching the real based on this "free play" is a good starting point for producing modes of thinking that can be alternative to an extremely analytical approach to the religious, which too often creates concepts that force the real to fit in. Such is the quasi-aesthetic proposal to the religious elaborated by Gianni Vattimo (1997, 2002). In fact, the arguments attempting to "demonstrate" God's existence and reality that have proven most successful have a typically aesthetic structure in the above sense. Such is the case of Peirce's "neglected argument", which starts from the disinterested contemplation that is at the basis of Kantian aesthetic judgment. But unlike Kant, in whom this judgment refers just to the state of the spirit of the judging subject itself, in Peirce, that wandering of thought which observes phenomena in a free, disinterested, and almost pleasurable way, establishing connections and analogies among them, shows that our natural inclination, consistent with our experience, to believe in God is, in fact, evidence of the existence of God (Peirce 1974). This religious *Erlebnis* is an eloquent kind of aesthetic experience.

The aestheticizing we are discussing here has nothing to do with that proposed, for example, by Santayana, Dewey, or Moore, theories that involve the abandonment of all supernatural pretensions. Rather, the aestheticization we suggest presupposes taking advantage of the fact that the objects of aesthetic judgment are those that seem to be ready to be understood, but somehow sabotage the process of understanding. Our process of comprehension develops in a de-automatized way, and somehow we grasp reality *in a different way* (Menke 1998), without exhausting the object of our understanding. Adorno's aesthetics, by conceptualizing the artwork as an enigma, albeit an enigma without a solution, insists on this unfathomable aspect. But this idea is also the template that any apophatic approach applies in dealing cognitively with the divine: yes, but no. We know without knowing. To think of the work of art in terms of resistance to conceptualization—but even so, as a space of some kind of specific knowledge—seems to be a very similar approach to that classic way of approximating the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, who resists being conceptualized, the God who in appearance can be understood, but who, once that process of understanding seems to have come to an end, expels us out. This is a deeply rooted certainty in theological tradition. From St. Augustine—*si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*—through Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1980, c.7, n.3) or Thomas Aquinas (*De Potentia* by Aquinas 1980, q.7, a.5) up until Vatican I, this idea is constantly repeated. This fact says as much about the nature of God as about the limits of our knowledge and the proper ways of addressing the question of the divine. Apophatic

theology makes us aware that reason is “smaller” than reality and that our knowledge of God, whatever it may be, when absolutized becomes an idol. Even Heidegger recognized that the god *causa sui* is neither prayed nor sacrificed to. Before the *causa sui* a person does not fall to their knees in fear, nor do they play music or dance in its presence. That is why Heidegger invites one to recover a thought without god, that abandons the god of philosophy to get closer to the divine God (Heidegger 2002a, p. 72).

To avoid turning God into an idol, into a hypostasis circumscribed by the conditions of possibility of knowledge imposed by the subject, some authors have adopted the phenomenological path (Robinette 2007). This tradition of thought has taken a theological turn to integrate the religious, and in some cases the authors do so from typically aesthetic perspectives. Among them, Jean-Luc Marion stands out in his reflection on saturated phenomena, a theoretical development that has had an enormous influence on various fields of theological debate and that clearly gravitates on this typically aesthetic element we have been developing. As is well known, saturated phenomena are those that saturate intuition with the given and fully occupy the experience of consciousness; they present excessive amounts of intuition and intentionality cannot adequately constitute them. They are excessive, extraordinary, blinding, and invisible by excess of light (Gschwandter 2011). In a typically aesthetic way, the visible is given in them as the presence of the invisible, and in an apophatic style, the conceptually developed is understood as a glimpse of the incomprehensible. Saturated phenomena bring out the fact that the difficulty of epistemically dealing with them is not a question of not having good enough concepts, but that what is given to the senses or to the intellect exceeds the capacities of both (Marion 2000). So, we should better adopt an aesthetic approach.

Actually, Marion understands this excess precisely in terms of the Kantian “aesthetic idea”, which provides more than thought can grasp conceptually. As opposed to the dominant current in modern thought, which considers sensible intuition as the bare material from which the subject elaborates concepts that capture the object in a stable way, Marion assumes that it is no longer the self that constitutes the object, but the self that is constituted by objects. Marion points to four types of saturation or excess, in terms of quantity (the historical or cultural event), quality (the work of art), relation (the immediacy of my flesh), and modality (the human other, ethical, erotic or otherwise) (Gschwandter 2011, p. 179). One can think of an example of saturation in which consciousness is overcome in all four aspects at once. Such a phenomenon would be incomprehensible and surprising, not only because it pushes the limits of our horizons, but because it transgresses them completely. And yet such a phenomenon could still be experienced (and thus described phenomenologically) in the impact it has on consciousness. It would be a phenomenon more radical, more excessive, more abundantly given than anything that has ever been experienced before. Such is the phenomenon of revelation. Marion insists that any description of the divine is always incomplete, a babbling like unto the language of the mystics, because humans lack phenomenological access to the divine as such, and any description or proof limits and reduces it, thus making of God an idol. With this proposal, Marion recovers certain elements of the apophatic approach to God, which he moulds on the aesthetic reflection offered by Kant. Marion’s development is an outstanding example of Aesthetic theology in progress.

5. Conclusions

What we have discussed in this paper presupposes that some of the contents, functions, etc. of religion have been passed on to art. This fact is something that theologians should realize. It has an enormous importance for our way of thinking, depicting, representing, or approaching God. Maybe it is time to regard the artworld as a locus theologicus once again; not just as a reservoir of materials, but as a place where the divine may manifest. As a result of this process, “Aesthetic theology” has emerged to make it possible to contemplate art via theological categories. Implied is the reality that some of the solutions theology has offered up through the centuries might prove useful in thinking about art. This theoretical

interweaving can also give rise to a theological reasoning based on the structure of aesthetic judgments, which embody the space of the postulated consensus, the alleged agreement a priori, without it being possible to force that judgment by conceptual means. This has always been the structure of the religious judgment: a postulated a priori agreement with regard to beliefs, without the possibility of forcing that agreement.

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Notes

- ¹ I find really clarifying the words of a humanist Chaplain in Harvard who, descendant of Holocaust survivors and child of atheists, claims: "I was raised to believe that humans are what matter. And art. We worshiped movies and books. Our Bible was everything from Neil Simon to the Russian novelists" (Freedman 2015).
- ² I am using the term in a different sense from that given by Viladesau, for whom "'aesthetic theology' [. . .] designates a form of theology that (to varying degrees) depends on the aesthetic realm for its language, content, method and theory: the conjunction of theology with the practice of imaginative and/or beautiful discourse ('theopoiesis') and with the theories thereof ('theopoetics'). The latter includes the application of literary and artistic theories either to theology's sources, in particular to the Scriptures, or to theology in general, conceived as an essentially hermeneutical enterprise" (Viladesau 1999, p. 19). My proposal for "Aesthetic theology" underlines, in a sense, the opposite thesis: rather than the dependence of theology on aesthetics, the reliance of art theory on theology, not only as an adopted method, but as a self-understanding of the discipline that brings the work of art closer to a divine reality. However, Viladesau's proposal fits perfectly well with the development I offer in point 4. Likewise, I have not discussed in detail von Balthasar's conception of "Aesthetic theology" and "Theological aesthetics" to avoid misunderstandings, as my proposal is different. This is von Balthasar's view: "There may well have been an historical Kairos [. . .] when human art and Christian revelation met in an encounter which saw the creation of icons, basilicas, and Romanesque cathedrals, sculptures and paintings. But since then too many misunderstandings and too many terrible things have occurred for us still to be in a position to insist more on the similarity of the two spheres than on their dissimilarity. Man's habit of calling beautiful only what strikes him as such appears insurmountable, at least on earth. And therefore, at least practically speaking, it seems both advisable and necessary to steer clear of the theological application of aesthetic concepts. A theology that makes use of such concepts will sooner or later cease to be a 'theological aesthetics'—that is, the attempt to do aesthetics at the level and with the methods of theology—and deteriorate into an 'aesthetic theology' by betraying and selling out theological substance to the current viewpoints of an inner-worldly theory of beauty" (Von Balthasar 1982, pp. 37–38). By "Aesthetic theology" Balthasar means the "theological application of aesthetic concepts". What I am proposing is the opposite—"philosophical (of art) application of theological concepts", following Schmitt's use of the substantive "theology" in political theory.
- ³ Specifically Matthew 17: 1–7.
- ⁴ "And to this office [consecrating the Eucharist and performing the sacrifice of the altar] three things are necessary, as we believe: namely, a certain person, that is a priest as we said above, properly established by a bishop for that office; and those solemn words which have been expressed by the holy Fathers in the canon; and the faithful intention of the one who offers himself" (Denzinger 1955, § 424).

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