

Editorial

The Aesthetic Face of the Sacred

Davor Džalto ^{1,2}¹ The Institute for the Study of Culture and Christianity, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia; davordzalto@gmail.com² The American University of Rome, Via Pietro Roselli 2, 00153 Rome, Italy

Received: 22 April 2019; Accepted: 25 April 2019; Published: 1 May 2019



Scene 1:

You enter a church—let us say it is a traditional Orthodox Church setting—to attend a church service. Immediately, you find yourself immersed in a profoundly aesthetic environment, which evokes a variety of rich sensory experiences. You *smell* incense, the clouds of which fill the space of the church, infused alongside the scent of the burning wax from the candles. You *listen* to the chanting. You *see* richly decorated priestly vestments, in white, red, green, gold visually resonating with the colorful paintings—icons—on the iconostasis and on the walls. Toward the end of the service, if you are a believer and an active member of the Church, you *taste* the Eucharist—you *eat* the bread and wine—the flesh and blood of Christ.

To a believer, all of these sensations are pregnant with a religious, spiritual meaning. As a believer, you may even claim that you experience the *sacred*, that you actually *see* the invisible, *sense* the insensible. You may claim (following the belief of the Church) that you have (fore) *tasted* the sacred, that you have become *one* with the (eschatological) reality of the coming Kingdom of God. You realize that there is no exclusion between the *spiritual* (eschatological) and the *material* (historical), between the *visible* and the *invisible*, between the *sensory* and the *in-experienceable*, between the *thinkable* and the *unthinkable*. They become *mystically* (that is, in an *iconic* manner) united, without confusion. For a believer, the aesthetic dimension is capable of communicating something that does not (fully) exist in our world; aesthetic elements give a “foretaste” of the future Kingdom of God.

If you are a non-believer, however, all of these (spiritual-sensory) experiences in their phenomenal dimension remain “purely” *aesthetic* experiences no matter how intense or profound, no matter how sense-, imagination- and thought-provoking they may be.

Scene 2:

You enter one of the major churches in Rome, known for their artistic riches. If you are a believer, say one of the pilgrims, you probably experience the “sacredness” of the space upon stepping inside. The church, after all, houses many of the relics of Christian saints. Many important personalities and events from church history have been associated with this specific place. The paintings that decorate the apse, the nave, or the side chapels, the sculptures that depict religious scenes and personalities, *make sense* to you as part of the liturgical environment—as a way to help you immerse yourself more fully into the liturgical sacraments and the mystery of the divine–human communion.

On the other hand, to a non-believer, say a specialist interested in painting or architecture, or even just a tourist visiting the place for its important art, the site is primarily a place of *aesthetic* contemplation, pleasure, or just as an “attraction,” which one should visit (and not necessarily *see*) when in Rome. Arguably, most of the visitors to the most *popular* churches in Rome go there just for that (pop) excitement, to be at an “important” place, and to take “selfies” next to the “masterpieces” as an important aspect of the whole ritual of this secular pilgrimage.

In this case, as in many other similar cases, the sacred space has become more of a gallery/museum space than a religious site. For most of the visitors, this kind of church environment exists to primarily

house, protect and exhibit art (and other curiosities) for the sake of education and for enabling the aesthetic experience that these works provide to the incalculable masses of people coming to see them. Yes, there is the “aura” of the “sacred” that is attached to these spaces, but this aura is “sacred” primarily in terms of the “importance” of the place (in the cultural history of the West), its “oldness,” the sense of tradition which these places inspire, together with their specific beauty (part of which are the visible historical layers of their decoration), rather than in terms of the religious rituals or some kind of the divine presence which is experienced there. The *sacred* is thus defined in secular terms, even replaced by the “secular sacred”.

Another even more striking example of the way in which (formally speaking) sacred spaces can be understood and utilized by the majority of the visitors as *secular sacred* spaces can be found in the still unfinished episcopal cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan. The “aura” of the “old” and “tradition” does not play an important role here (for obvious reasons), except through the formal references to “tradition” such as the (pseudo) gothic style in which the building has been built (which clearly differentiates it from the neighboring structures), and, arguably aspires to “borrow” a sense of the sacred understood (in some sense at least) as a *tradition-bearing* quality. It is a place which is regularly visited and admired by non-religious people for the riches of its cultural programs: exhibitions, performances, concerts (many of them very “progressive” in the techniques they use and the topics they address). The secular sacred seems to appear at the intersection of these *tradition-bearing* elements that shape the space and the contemporary aesthetic spectacles that happen inside of it.

Scene 3:

You enter a museum. Let it be a traditional museum of *fine arts* that houses numerous old and new *masterpieces*. From the very beginning, by the design of the building (many of these museums follow the traditional form of ancient Greek and Roman temples, even though they may incorporate new, contemporary, high-tech additions to the traditional layout), by the design of the rooms, and by the atmosphere of (sacred) silence and appreciation, you are reminded that the space you enter is a special one, different from other public places. The museum is there to allow the visitors to enjoy and appreciate the *works of art* (as some kind of secular sacred relics), to study them, to experience an aesthetic excitement by looking at them, and to meditate in front of them. This *setting apart* (from the ordinary context) of the museum space and artworks that are defined as *special* (i.e., masterpieces, aesthetic objects of great [aesthetic but also material] value) is one of the most common strategies of turning a place into a *sacred place*. Indeed, modern museums of fine arts have been conceptualized, designed and used as the places of the “secular sacred” worship. These spaces allow for the experience of the “sacred” but in “purely” (secularized) aesthetic terms. In that sense, they have, to a large extent, functioned as a substitution for the traditional sacred space (e.g., churches) that have also performed an aesthetic function, but within a (traditionally conceptualized) sacred environment.

This presents us with the difficulty of how to think the “sacred” and the “aesthetic” in the contemporary context. One can claim that the boundary between the two has never been very sharp, and that the modern attempt to offer an *enlightened* narrative about the aesthetic, which would effectively secularize the (traditional) aesthetic by turning it into a secular-religious (and, up to a point, civil-religious) phenomenon, has only led to an ever deeper confusion between the two, allowing for the many manifestations of the sacred in and via “purely” aesthetic means and even non-religious artworks. In all of the above listed examples, the boundary between a (“pure”) aesthetic experience/pleasure and a religious/spiritual one is very blurred. Instead of “religious” and “aesthetic” experiences, we are rather confronted with a mix of various “religious-aesthetic” (or “aesthetic-religious”) experiences that very much depend on our expectations and attitudes, such as: Do we enter a church as Christian believers, or as scholars who are interested in Christian iconography? Do we go there as art lovers who expect a (secular) “mystical” experience in front of an artwork (which may even result in the “Stendhal syndrome” kind of experiences), and do we enter a gallery to admire artworks that have already been introduced to us as “masterpieces,” “unique” in their aesthetic achievements and their

(secular) “aura”? All of these thoughts, expectations, convictions, beliefs, values and emotions (often diverse, even contradictory), determine our experiences of the (“purely”) aesthetic and/or the “sacred.”

In this modern “aura” surrounding the works of art (especially the “masterpieces”) and in those modern spaces of “aesthetic contemplation” (e.g., museums), one can see typically modern (secular) appropriations of the (traditional) “sacred.” Is it not the “aura” of something special, exclusive and valuable, what inspired the veneration of traditional relics (such as the bones of the saints), *cult objects as artworks* (e.g., miracle-making icons), and *artworks as cult(ic) objects* (the modern “masterpieces”)?

Beyond the (unavoidable) ideological dimension which accompanies all aesthetics as well as sacred narratives, one can think about the significance of the basic elements of our sensuous perception for the character and quality of our aesthetic/sacred experiences. Modern art and modern scholarship on art have also attempted to go beyond focusing merely on the subject matter when analyzing the issue of the sacred in order to understand the relevancy of the very aesthetic elements of art and the artistic process (including the quality of the paint, texture, light and shading effects, etc.) for the mediation of the sacred or the very experience of it.

In some places, and in certain museums, people are still capable of “de-aestheticizing” paintings *qua* artworks in order to approach them primarily as paintings or sculptures with a religious significance and the aura of the sacred. When one, for instance, visits the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, one will not only find some of the greatest masterpieces of art history, nor will one only encounter the specialists, tourists and school tours there, one will additionally meet people who make the sign of the cross when they approach the icons exhibited there. These icons “radiate” their sacredness even within the museum/gallery environment, but one realizes that a “proper” way to *see* them would be inside the church (where, of course, most of them would be placed on the iconostasis, which means that in actual reality it would be much more difficult to *see* their entire surface and appreciate their visual elements).

It seems that the museum and the church have, up to a point, switched their roles over the period of modernity, up to the point that many churches in the West have effectively become museums and many museums serve as a substitution for the church in the type of experience they offer. It seems that we live in a time when both of these (secular) sacred spaces are going through yet another transformation and re-definition. Many churches and museums are embracing the “consumer-centered” approach and the all-penetrating “business logic.” The kind of effects that this will have toward the type of both aesthetic and sacred experiences is slowly becoming discernable.

This all coincides with the rise of the “post-secular” era in which we are witnesses to a renewed interest in religion and the sacred in the West (which, one could claim, has never really been absent). We are becoming more and more aware of the complexity of the issues surrounding the religious and the sacred, as well as the ideological dimension and the potential for manipulation which is inherent to both the religious/sacred and the aesthetic. This special issue examines manifold facets of these phenomena by offering the reader six essays by eminent scholars working in the domains of religious studies, theology and philosophy.

In *Aesthetics, Music, and Meaning-Making*, Graham Ward presents us with his most recent reflections from the domain of theological aesthetics, which, together with the theology of the socio-political, remains one of his central theological and philosophical interests. In this essay, Ward explores a couple of fundamental aesthetic concepts—such sensory experience, rhythm, harmony, pleasure—based on Augustine. Ward dives into a complex analysis of particular concepts and their etymology, and the ways in which sensory phenomena come to *mean* something for us. This rewarding intellectual journey takes us, ultimately, into the realm of the created and the uncreated, where Augustine’s understanding of music, and Ward’s interpretation of it, situate aesthetic phenomena as indispensable aspects of our movement (in history) toward the eschaton—the movement in which the “meaningful and aesthetic are continually emerging.”

Similar to Ward, Oleg Bychkov also inquires into some of the fundamental aesthetic categories and their conceptualization in the late Medieval period. “*He Who Sees Does Not Desire to Imagine*”: *The Shifting Role of Art and Aesthetic Observation in Medieval Franciscan Theological Discourse in the*

Fourteenth Century is a philosophical investigation which is situated within the broader context of religious imagery and its meaning in the Western (post-*Libri Carolini*) tradition. Only when seen against this tradition does one realize the novelty of the approach of the Franciscan theologians in the fourteenth century, who came to pay more attention to sensory experiences (and the formal/aesthetic properties of artworks) rather than to the religious-symbolic meanings associated with images in the traditional theologies of icons. Focusing on the meaning of sensory experiences had another important implication: it required formulating a more general epistemology which would account for (tricky) sensory perception and experiences, but which would simultaneously preserve the ontic integrity of reality (as God's creation). In this sense, the question of aesthetics becomes linked with the question of the sacred (and the possibility of its experience) in the most immediate way.

In "... *With a Book in Your Hands*": *A Reflection on Imaging, Reading, Space, and Female Agency*, Diane Apostolos-Cappadona offers the reader a fascinating journey, which brings together theological aesthetics and cultural history in order to unpack the phenomenon of visual depictions of women in the act of reading in the early modern Western tradition. Apostolos-Cappadona explores the social and cultural dimensions of the *meditative* and *engaged* act of reading a (religious) book, especially in the Protestant context, as evidenced in the art of painting. In particular, she focuses on Vermeer's depictions of the subject, all of which are as intriguing and seductive as they are visually appealing. What Apostolos-Cappadona manages to show in her essay is the convergence of the visually and text-mediated religious (and mystical) experiences of "theory" (contemplation) the (female) reader is engaged in (when reading a religious text) alongside a (religious/mystical) "practice" of reading and contemplation, which requires (especially for the purposes of visual representations) a specific *decorum*, specific pose, specific gestures.

In *Beyond Making and Unmaking: Re-Envisioning Sacred Art*, Daniel Gustafson investigates the relationship between Orthodox Christianity and modern and contemporary art. To this end, he explores a variety of classical as well as contemporary authors. What Gustafson's analysis makes apparent is the need for revisiting the question of the possibility of *sacred* modern and contemporary art (approaching the sacred from an Orthodox Christian theological perspective). This means that what Gustafson is proposing is an engagement with modern and contemporary artistic practices/methodologies and the sacred beyond the competencies of (theological) aesthetics traditionally understood. The goal is the actualization of the *sacred* as something that has to do with the very existential aspects of the human being, including freedom, love, and, ultimately, human eschatological existence. In this context, the (re)actualization of form and beauty reorients Christian art from its focus on "sacred" narratives (specific iconography) to beauty and the formal properties of the artwork, and thus suggests that we "should not expect Christian art [...] to strive for formal perfection, but perhaps rather to be elliptical, ecstatic, and epiphanic."

Both Gustafson and Randall K. Van Schepen, although in very different ways, explore in their essays the spiritual/mystical dimensions of materiality and aesthetic experiences in the context of contemporaneity and contemporary artistic approaches and techniques. Van Schepen's essay on *Contemporary Mysticism: Recovering Sensible Aesthetics in an Age of Digital Production* primarily explores the famous Walter Benjamin's argument on the aura and the reproducibility of images. He examines Benjamin's thesis with the help of a range of works by contemporary artists who use photography in a way which diverges from the visual properties of omnipresent digitally produced and digitally manipulated images. To the "hyper-real digital imagery" which "colonizes the material reality it points to, transforming our experience of materiality into one that is increasingly abstracted from the body," he contrasts the artistic practices that "mistify" (not a typo!) images "by occluding them in order to recover a more immediate and sensuous relation to the world, one that nevertheless also ushers in the spiritual." Through his detailed explanation of individual artistic strategies and technical/technological properties of their works (including their reproducibility), Van Schepen offers an important contribution to the broader discourse on the meaning of materiality (for us) vis-à-vis visual representations of the world, and the capacity of visual media to "re-materialize" our experience of both images and (more) "reality."

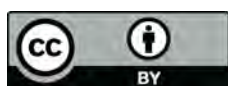
James Romaine adds another dimension to the topic of contemporary art, its material qualities and its relationship with the invisible and the incomprehensible, with his *Beyond Belief: Chance, Authorship, and the Limits of Comprehension in Gerhard Richter's Strip*. Romaine focuses on the visual qualities of Richter's works (primarily his 2011 "Strip"), within the context of the artist's ambiguous relationship with the sacred/religious and the transcendental. As arguably one of the most prominent contemporary painters, Richter's art provides an important example of a contemporary artistic engagement with the domain of faith. To be able to believe in something "greater than ourselves," something "incomprehensible," appears, for Richter, as a distinctly human capacity. This profoundly human capacity is closely related to art, which appears as "the only means of realizing that belief in material and present form." Examining the technical aspects of the painting process, and the visual (and cognitive) aspects of Richter's works, Romaine also manages to rephrase the issue of authorship—which is, in many ways, crucial for the whole modern(ist) understanding of the artwork and its "aura"—relating it to the questions of (im)materiality and (in)comprehensibility.

In *Aesthetic Experience as a Spiritual Support of Homo Post-Secularis*, Viktor Bychkov explores the issue of post-secularity and the possible role of the aesthetic in bridging the secular and religious/sacred domains. With his status as a pre-eminent scholar in (Orthodox) Christian aesthetics in Russia, Bychkov's essay is also representative of a different approach and a different style of narration, which is informed by the great tradition of Russian religious philosophers and theologians. At times, in a provocative and even prophetic manner, relying on many prominent authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bychkov discussed various phenomena such as *theurgy* and its connection with human creative capacities, and the "essence" of art. Bychkov uses the concepts of aesthetic and artistic "qualities" in an essentially Romanticist way. He contrasts those *essential* properties of "high art" to the "contemporary art practices" that, in his view, refuse the aesthetic as an important point of reference.

With that, I hope that the richness of methodological approaches and the diversity of the topics discussed in these essays will help us all unpack and better understand some of the most acute questions surrounding the use of artistic media and our experiences of the aesthetic and the sacred in our contemporary culture.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).