Broken Open by Beauty:
Art and Metaphysics in the Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar

by

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Abstract

The work of the influential Jesuit theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) has become a common point of reference in discussing the relationship of theology and the arts. However, the full significance of his theological aesthetics for both the emerging field of theology and the arts, as well as for interdisciplinary conversation with contemporary art and theory, remains to be unfolded. Indeed, his continued relevance to theological aesthetics has been called into question from a number of angles. Taking heed of such criticisms while ultimately moving beyond them, this project contends that Balthasar’s theo-aesthetics, when taken together with his theological dramatics and theo-logic, yield a theologically informed phenomenology of the work of art with rich implications for postmodern and contemporary theologies of art. This phenomenological approach is consonant with Balthasar’s controlling analogy (“seeing the form”) between Christ (as supreme “form”) and the work of art. As is demonstrated, Balthasar’s nascent phenomenology of art is best seen in the light of Martin Heidegger’s fundamental questioning of the “origin” of the work of art, a question which Balthasar answers ontologically and ultimately christologically through his concept of “form.” In investigating the nature and disclosure of Being through art; Balthasar’s theological re-
reading of Heidegger; the dramatic relation of all forms to Christ; and his phenomenology of truth, Balthasar’s philosophical and theological insights into the nature of art are presented as a resource for a constructive theology of art which “springs” from the depths of his theological aesthetics.
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During my time at the Toronto School of Theology, I have split my time between teaching at a number of schools all around Ontario – in the School of Religion at Queen’s University in Kingston; in the Faculty of Humanities at Sheridan College in Oakville; at Tyndale Seminary in North York; and most recently at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. Whether Catholic, evangelical, mainline Protestant, or none of the above, my students and colleagues at these institutions have deeply enriched my own study of theology and helped me consider how my research can be of use to church, academy, and culture.

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Introduction

There is no question that the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905—1988) has become a common point of reference in the emerging field of theology and the arts. This is largely due to the increasing influence of his major work Herrlichkeit (translated into English as The Glory of the Lord), a seven-volume exposition of theological aesthetics often credited alongside the work of Karl Barth for reintroducing the concept of beauty into contemporary theological discourse.\(^1\) Much more so than any of the Protestant theologians of his era writing at the intersection of art and theology (Paul Tillich, Amos Wilder, Gerardus van der Leeuw) and arguably to a greater extent than his famous Catholic contemporaries (Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson), Balthasar has emerged as a necessary touchstone for subsequent theological engagements with art and beauty, particularly his famous account of the loss of transcendent Beauty in modernity.\(^2\) Some contemporary theologians have gravitated towards Balthasar’s insights but have sought to supplement them with a more


fundamental theological or philosophical method, such as John Dadosky (employing the thought of Bernard Lonergan) or the late Alejandro García-Rivera (turning to the pragmatic philosophy of Charles Peirce). Others have roundly criticized Balthasar for being too hierarchical in his ecclesiology, too heterodox in his Trinitarian theology, too “unsystematic” in his method, and/or too conservative on a number of social issues. Still others have found in his theology a compelling case for an integrative, even symphonic vision of Christian theology centred on Trinitarian disclosure and the radiant form of Christ. His influence continues to grow both in Catholic theology and within the vibrant ecumenical discourse surrounding theology and the arts, both for his openness to beauty, art, poetry, and literature and for the compelling analogy he draws between “seeing the form” of Christ and our experience of a masterful work of art. Davide Zordan and Stefanie Knauss sum up Balthasar’s contribution to subsequent theological aesthetics succinctly: by combining “foundational theology” (“how God’s revelation can be perceived and received by human beings”) and “a dogmatic theme” (“the doctrine of participation in the divine life”), Balthasar, with his analogical approach, has exerted “a decisive influence on the development of theology and in particular aesthetic theology” which far surpasses the contributions of more straightforward theologians of art such as

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4 For criticism of Balthasar which even calls into question his value as a ‘systematic’ theologian, one need look no further than Karen Kilby, Balthasar: a (very) critical introduction (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).
Paul Tillich, whose existential methods (e.g. correlation) have subsequently fallen out of favour.⁵

However, the purpose of Herrlichkeit is not first and foremost to set out a natural theology of art based on the primacy of beauty; as a result of this, the relationship of his theological aesthetics to sacred and secular art is “frequently misunderstood.”⁶ Moreover, despite its palpable influence on the field, Balthasar’s theological aesthetics steadfastly resists attempts to draw out a systematic theology of art. In fact, he explicitly disavows what he terms “aesthetic theology,” an attempt to move directly from art to divine mystery—a view of the work of art as directly mediating transcendence along German Idealist or Romantic lines—suggesting in a Barthian (and explicitly Kierkegaardian) vein that such a move leads ultimately to idolatry, and a failure to grapple seriously with the compelling otherness of the divine.⁷ Balthasar’s aim in The Glory of the Lord is rather to uncover a biblical, philosophical theology of glory, carefully appropriating the language we commonly use to describe experience of a work of art to convey something of the divine radiance across the dynamic, “ever-greater”

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⁵ Davide Zordan and Stefanie Knauss, “Following the Traces of God in Art: Aesthetic Theology as Foundational Theology,” CrossCurrents (March 2013), 5.
relationality of the *analogia entis*. For Balthasar, the glory of the Triune God is manifested supremely in the revealed “form” of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This is a theophany which both fulfills and surpasses the language of Western metaphysics, and so too overflows the boundaries of philosophical aesthetics.

Balthasar’s task in *Herrlichkeit* is thus one of both faithful and creative *ressourcement*: to trace the echoes of this manifest glory through philosophy, theology, art, literature, and above all the Christian Scriptures in hope of reconstructing a deeper, more “comprehensive doctrine of being.”

As shall be demonstrated, Balthasar is, to be sure, deeply interested in the human search for the divine through art and philosophy, particularly in the notions of primal wonder (*thaumazein*) and desire (*eros*). Yet his theological aesthetics do not proceed from the starting-point of the human seeker, nor even from ancient notions of the sacred or numinous in art, but by taking as a first word for theology “beauty”—not just the beautiful as available to the subject, but Beauty ‘objectively’ considered as a transcendental aspect of Being. This thus precludes a simple dialogue between

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8 The term *analogia entis* is a longstanding one in Catholic theology, dating back at least to Suarez, but in reference to Balthasar it is most often traced back to Erich Przywara, *Analogia entis: Metaphysik* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1962) English translation *Analogia entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).


10 See the famous “Introduction” to *GL1*. A more seeker-oriented approach to the relationship of humanity to Being can be discerned in the work of Paul Tillich and
Balthasar’s work and contemporary theologies of art, not to mention the divergent realm of contemporary art and theory outside of the church. Rather than beginning with contemporary works of visual art—in fact, with the exception of Georges Rouault he practically ignores twentieth-century examples—Balthasar engages in an enormous project which aims to reconstruct Western metaphysics by recovering the glory of Christ through the ages, going back even before Christianity to the “realm of metaphysics in antiquity” and forward through the centuries to modern philosophy, literature, and theology. It is only, for Balthasar, when metaphysics has been reconstituted around the supreme “form” of Christ that art, philosophy, and theology can find their place.

Goals

With this larger picture in mind, it is the contention of this work that although Balthasar steadfastly resisted creating a systematic philosophy or “theology of art” like Tillich or Maritain—perhaps fearing it might degenerate into what he terms “aesthetic theology”—Balthasar’s thought remains a fruitful resource for contemporary theological aesthetics. This basic premise will be developed with reference to a question posed by one of Balthasar’s key influences, the enigmatic Martin Heidegger (1889–1976): what is the origin of the work of art? The answer Balthasar implicitly gives to this question reveals his relationship to the phenomenological tradition in modern philosophy, draws on his classical account of the mediation of Being, and ultimately is answered in his Emil Brunner. The term “numinous” is generally ascribed to Rudolf Otto from his The Idea of the Holy, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1925).
“aesthetic christology”—the work of art, as “form,” is ontologically, dramatically related to the revealed form of Christ. Balthasar’s concept of “form,” by combining Heidegger’s radically non-theistic, postmetaphysical phenomenology with the ‘positive’ resources of Christian doctrine and Thomist ontology, provides the opportunity for a rich understanding of the hermeneutical, embodied and disclosive nature of artistic form along not only ontological but theological grounds. Though this is a move precluded by Heidegger’s philosophical method, it is consistent with the approach employed by Balthasar in his creative appropriation of Heideggerian categories. A Balthasarian phenomenology of art both points towards a theological aesthetics in the sense Balthasar envisioned – where aesthetic experience of the work of art provides an analogue for “seeing the form” of God in Christ—and transfigures philosophical aesthetics, exposing the theological “origin” of the work of art.

Why is such a study necessary in the wake of Balthasar’s theo-aesthetic investigations?

Alejandro García-Rivera states the problem succinctly:

A theological aesthetics without a theology of art is not able in itself to address the problem of the loss of beauty von Balthasar raises. Yes, we must learn to find beauty once again or we will find ourselves in a world ‘no longer able to love.’ But how is beauty once more to be found? ... We have forgotten how to look and see. That is where a theology of art comes in. It is art, I believe, that promises to teach theology how to see again.

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11 For an overview of Heidegger’s background in Thomist/neo-scholastic philosophy and German Catholicism, and how these affected his thought even after he sought to leave them behind, see S.J. Clark, Heidegger: A (Very) Critical Introduction (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 11-17.

In its radiant appearance, the work of art, for Balthasar, can point us to Christ—though only analogically, for glory always outstrips worldly beauty. The present work is a constructive deployment of Balthasar’s thought to discern a theological phenomenology of art—one that uses Balthasarian theological aesthetics as a resource for phenomenological method, but also investigates contemporary art, theory, and both philosophical and theological aesthetics for further elucidations.13

The State of the Question

This is not to say that Balthasar’s thought has not previously been investigated in terms of its significance for the arts. Here a brief review of the present state of studies of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics is helpful in situating this project. Firstly, the work of Fr. Aidan Nichols is particularly relevant as an extension of Balthasar’s views into the realm of the arts, in conversation with similar themes in the Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov. Nichols’ constructive works *The Art of God Incarnate* and *Redeeming Beauty* as well as his multivolume commentaries on Balthasar’s work, ranging from Balthasar’s early writings (including his doctoral dissertation *The Apocalypse of the German Soul*) through Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, dramatics,

13 The methodological question which remains is an important one, and worth asking at the outset: “Aesthetics is in itself a vaguely defined discipline: could using it as an analogy to a theological approach actually obscure the picture, rather than clarify it?” It is the contention of this project that Balthasar’s controlling analogy between beauty and glory illuminates much more than it obfuscates, even in the contemporary situation. See Oleg Bychkov and James Fodor, eds., *Theological Aesthetics After Von Balthasar* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), xxiii.
and logic, paint a compelling picture of Balthasar’s use of art, literature, and philosophy as well-suited to address and inform each of these disciplines.¹⁴ Balthasar is also, with his emphasis on the beauty of revelation, an apologist for beauty in theology in a way that seems to commend thoughtful meditation on art and poetry, a problem taken up by one of Balthasar’s key English translators and interlocutors, the late Edward T. Oakes.¹⁵ For Oakes, Balthasar makes possible a new means of engaging culture with the eyes of faith; rather than trotting out a “bloodless,” “scholastic” argument for God’s existence, he provides by focusing on the aesthetic a way to “credibly present the mysteries of Christian revelation to an increasingly skeptical public.”¹⁶


Another important figure in considering Balthasar’s relationship to art and philosophy is Fergus Kerr. In *After Aquinas* and other articles he probes the depths of Balthasar’s seemingly paradoxical retrieval of Heidegger within the context of a Christian metaphysics downstream from Thomas Aquinas and Plotinus.¹⁷ Rather than seeing Heidegger as outside of this tradition, he rather reads him as offering the way back in: “it is not a question of transcending the metaphysical tradition, by climbing still higher; rather, the right kind of post-Heideggerian thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the nearness of the near,” the particular and the intimate, which is precisely where Being is to be found as gift (*Ergebnis*, in Heidegger’s terminology).¹⁸

Once Balthasar’s major works began to appear in English, a generation of scholars followed suit (particularly in the 1990s) by drawing attention to his work, particularly his aesthetics, within English-speaking theology. This grouping includes such names as Jeffrey Ames Kay, Larry Chapp, John O’Donnell, Raymond Gawronski, Bede McGregor, and Francesca Aran Murphy.¹⁹ Though each of these authors are excellent companions

¹⁷ Plotinus ought not to be dismissed as ontotheological, as for him “Being remains a superconceptual mystery.” Quoted in Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 90.
¹⁸ Kerr, 90.
to Balthasar, Gawronski’s work is particularly notable with reference to interdisciplinary dialogue (such as with art theory and philosophy) as it goes beyond outlining Balthasar’s theological aims to employing Balthasar’s work constructively to mediate between Catholic theology – Ignatian spirituality in particular – and the mystical traditions of the Eastern religions. Perhaps the most interdisciplinary of this generation of English-speaking Balthasar scholars, however, is Cyril O’Regan, whose work looks to Balthasar not only as a theologian but in dialogue with modern and postmodern philosophy, from Eric Voegelin to Jean-Luc Marion. His larger, ongoing project is dedicated to uncovering Gnostic tendencies in contemporary Western philosophical thought; he deals in depth with Balthasar’s creative “misremembering” (in the sense of Harold Bloom’s poetic “mispriision”) of Hegel (volume 1) and, in a second as yet unpublished volume, Heidegger. This kind of cross-disciplinary, philosophical appropriation of Balthasar continues in the work of Anthony Sciglitano. Finally, a new generation of Balthasar scholars have sought to articulate the implications of his thought for eschatology.

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(Nicholas Healy) and ecumenism (Rodney Howsare); while Mark McInroy has provided an excellent study of his doctrine of the spiritual senses.

Balthasar’s thought has generated a vast sea of secondary literature, and this is only a small sampling. There continues to be a voluminous amount of scholarship on Balthasar in German, French, and Italian, most notably the work of Angelo Scola, Karl Lehmann, Werner Löser, Manfred Lochbrunner and Thomas Krenski. Rather than profiling all of Balthasar’s primary interlocutors, however, for our purposes here it is preferable to concentrate on several figures in the post-Balthasarian landscape of theological aesthetics who are moving the conversation forward in new directions relevant to the theology of art. In terms of explicitly Balthasarian theological approaches to art, Aidan Nichols, Ed Block, David L. Schindler, and Michael P. Murphy rank among those who have contributed most to understanding Balthasar’s work in terms of his eclectic theological, philosophical, and artistic influences, while also pushing towards an understanding of the significance of his thought for art and literature. These are all

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23 Nicholas J. Healy, *The eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: being as communion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). This Nicholas Healy is not to be confused with the contemporary ecclesiologist of the same name.


26 See Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ed Block, Jr., ed. *Glory, grace and culture: the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Paulist Pres, 2005); Michael P. Murphy, A
Roman Catholic thinkers, working in a way consistent with Balthasar’s method of “integration”—art reflects the ontological and theological concerns of metaphysics, while Christian theology finds itself shaped by the arts. Richard Viladesau, Ben Quash, and Bruce Ellis Benson have also outlined constructive theologies of art which draw on Balthasar. Benson’s *Liturgy as a Way of Life* and Quash’s *Found Theology* are particularly valuable discussions, by Protestants, of Balthasar’s work in conversation with notions of appropriation and creativity.\(^{27}\) Finally, Anne Carpenter’s recent work on Balthasar and the “risk of art and being” also holds much promise as an in-depth examination of Balthasar’s attitudes to art and literature, particularly in the German context, while also extending potentialities of his thought into contemporary conversations.\(^{28}\)

The present study fits into this established body of literature as a constructive attempt to both understand Balthasar’s Heideggerian quest for Being and to appropriate his phenomenological approach for a nascent contemporary theology of art. Significantly, it also will look not only to his theological aesthetics as unfolded in the seven volumes of *The Glory of the Lord*, but to the rest of Balthasar’s great (and only comparatively

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recently published in English) “triptych”—the theological aesthetics (Herrlichkeit), the theological dramatics (Theodramatik—5 vols. in English) and the philosophical-theological explorations of Theologik (3 vols.), correlating to beauty, goodness, and truth, respectively—for interdisciplinary insight.29 Continuing the trajectory of Carpenter, Quash, and Benson, and with particular reference to Nichols, Kerr, and O’Regan (among many others) this study takes the (Heideggerian) question of the origin of the work of art as a new and helpful way of unfolding Balthasar’s aesthetic and metaphysical legacy.

This constructive application of Balthasar’s rich account of “beauty, truth and disclosure” to the human experience of art is consistent with his overall project of linking aesthetic experience (the domain of phenomenology) to the deep structures of Being (metaphysics). It is also consistent with his theological anthropology (the seedbed for a theodramatic “theology of culture”) which values openness to creative, dialogical interaction with the “forms” of the created order as a first step towards the divine. Finally, the unique hermeneutical posture which the artwork invites is also implicit in his philosophical and theological treatment of the nature of truth. Balthasar’s project thus provides the impetus for an empirical understanding of art (what Goethe termed a zarte

Empirie)\textsuperscript{30} which takes up both creative making and aesthetic experience into an
intersubjective theological encounter—which as shall be demonstrated, reveals a subtle
bridge between his theological aesthetics and theolog[ies] of art.

**Scope and Content**

This study will examine five aspects of Balthasar’s theological method in dialogue with
both the history of philosophical aesthetics and contemporary theological aesthetics.
Through these explorations in Balthasar’s thought in conversation with philosophers,
theologians, and artists, I seek to demonstrate that Balthasar provides the basis for
what might be termed a theologically-inflected phenomenology of the work of art,
whereby the ontological “event” of theological disclosure emerges in embodied,
dramatic, hermeneutical engagement with aesthetic form.\textsuperscript{31} For Balthasar, artistic form,
like all other created forms, presents itself \textit{(phainesthai)} to perception as a
manifestation of the depths of Being, specifically its truth, beauty and goodness as
mediated by the “ever-greater dissimilarity” of the \textit{analogia entis}. A phenomenology of
art which draws on Balthasar’s theo-aesthetics thus concerns itself with both subjective
perception of the radiant qualities of the artwork, and the theological and ontological
ramifications of this disclosure – including the convergence of “subject” and “object” in


\textsuperscript{31} To speak of Balthasar’s “theological phenomenology” is consistent both with
his own use of the latter term and with subsequent studies such as Ilkamaria Kuhr,
\textit{Gabe und Gestalt: theologische Phänomenologie bei Hans Urs von Balthasar}
(Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2012).
an intersubjective, transformative encounter. Balthasar’s phenomenological approach, which investigates truth and beauty “from below” in terms of desire, openness, receptivity, and disclosure, keeps his theological interests in the immanent domain of sense and sensation rather than abstraction, and thus is bound to intersect critical themes in postmodern (and, perhaps counterintuitively, even “postmetaphysical”) philosophy and theology. Outlining the contours of a Balthasarian phenomenology of art subsequently helps carve out a place for his continued relevance in the robust contemporary conversation surrounding theology and the arts.

The Introduction has set the scene by contextualizing the particular questions posed in this dissertation in relation to the current state of scholarship on Balthasar. Chapter 1 begins with a further discussion of context, both theological and philosophical—namely, by relating Balthasar’s project to the fissures between contemporary theological aesthetics, art theory, and "theologies of art." I outline the present literature in theology and the arts with reference to Balthasar’s aims, and subsequently examine Richard Viladesau's critique of Balthasar's theo-aesthetics as too "intra-ecclesial" to provide a credible theological aesthetics, one that accounts for the full range of human sensation, beauty and the arts. I then also raise concerns derived from the work of Reformed thinkers William Dyrness and Nicholas Wolterstorff about Balthasar’s relevance to actual art and artists in the contemporary situation.
Chapter 2 explores Balthasar’s concept of artistic form as a unique “miracle” or interruption—the “event of the beautiful” (das Ereignis des Schönen)—which functions as an analogue to divine revelation. Balthasar’s unique approach to the question of the artistic masterpiece and its self-authenticating, self-interpreting power and beauty is the key to the place the work of art holds in his theological aesthetics. Balthasar’s theo-aesthetics are predicated on the central metaphor of “seeing the form,” the act of beholding a supreme work of art, and so can be thought of as a kind of simultaneous phenomenology of art and revelation centered on Christ who as the perfect artwork is both unique and the ultimate measure of all artistic forms. Here emerges the notion of a phenomenology of art which is ontological, embodied, hermeneutical, and deeply sacramental, embracing both subject and form in a process of mutual dialogue and transformation. Yet here already Balthasar’s aesthetics pass into Christian theology, for art conceived of as an opening or 'gathering' which enables the event of the disclosure of Being (as in Heidegger) is for Balthasar always-already the appearance of the divine through the depths of the "form" (Balthasar)—a simultaneously metaphysical and christological aesthetics which awakens wonder and desire.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the connection between art and Being by asking a question famously posed by Martin Heidegger: what is the origin of the work of art? Balthasar’s theological project makes space for the language of both “event” (Ereignis) and of transcendental “structure” in discussing the beautiful as a disclosure of Being. For this reason he has been termed (by Fergus Kerr and others) a “Heideggerian Thomist,” and
this is an apt description of his approach to art. I begin by outlining Balthasar’s Christian retrieval of Greek metaphysics (particularly in the fourth volume of *The Glory of the Lord*) and subsequent tracing of a doctrine of glory through the “classical mediation” into the modern age, paying particular heed to his engagement of Meister Eckhart and modern art. Chapter 4 continues this quest for glory by focusing in particular on Balthasar’s complex relationship with Heidegger’s thought. Balthasar heeds Heidegger’s important warnings regarding the danger of “onto-theology” which, forgetful of the ontological difference, loses sight of the mystery and dynamism of Being. However, he ultimately resists Heidegger’s impulse to reject the “metaphysics of presence” and identify Being with pure becoming—a projection against the backdrop of nothingness. Rather, Balthasar finds the true ground for ontological wonder in a loving God, not in the process of nihilation by which Heidegger’s thinking proceeds toward Being. Applied to the problem of the origin of the work of art, Balthasar’s theological aesthetic thus yields an account of the relationship of the artistic form to Being which draws Heidegger’s insights regarding the ontology of “truth,” “beauty,” and the event (Ereignis) toward positive theological claims rather than the inherent tendency towards nihilism (in the form of nothingness or das Nichtige) they arguably take on in his own project. This is, undeniably, a nihilism which in Heidegger’s case carries ontological, artistic and political implications. For Balthasar, “form” (Gestalt) makes concrete and discernible the connection between art and metaphysics. Even when the aesthetic form itself is non-beautiful or even grotesque, it unfolds itself against the horizon of Being, a reminder of its theological, not just immanent, potency. For Balthasar, the origin of the
work of art is wonder—which itself is inscribed in the “wound” in the heart of Being, an ‘opening’ with both ontological and theological implications.

Chapter 5 examines Balthasar’s phenomenology of art in terms of the Hegelian model of the artwork as “sensuous presence.” Balthasar’s archaeology of glory places a high emphasis on the role of the human sensorium in the structure of revelation. Though this can be parsed out into physical and spiritual dimensions, for Balthasar aisthesis (the sensory, sensuous nature of human experience often covered over by the modern term “aesthetics”) is the venue in which our encounter with God is possible.32 I turn to a close reading of sections from the first volume of Balthasar's The Glory of The Lord and the second volume of Explorations in Theology in order to highlight Balthasar's oft-neglected emphasis on the sensorium, the venue through which the subject experiences the world and art in particular. Balthasar offers a holistic, incarnational theology of the senses (theological aisthesis) as the permeable threshold through which phenomena, including the ultimate “saturated phenomenon” (Jean-Luc Marion) of revelation, enter into communion with the self.33 Beauty here appears as the “event” of desire and rapturous transport where the senses are transfigured into a sense for glory. Balthasar’s emphasis on phenomenality is thus reminiscent of more modern phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, but read through the ancient context of the physical senses opening

out onto the spiritual senses (Origen, etc.). Balthasar’s metaphysics are never abstract, but are deeply rooted in sensory perception. Moreover, Balthasar’s cruciform, christological aesthetics, far from sidestepping questions about human brokenness, alienation, and sin, call for a death and resurrection of the human sensorium, and thus unfold a *theologia gloria* with a keenly “immanent,” theodramatic *theologia crucis* at its centre. As shall be demonstrated, this is an embodied, radical approach to transcendental aesthetics with important resonances with postmodern philosophy, pointing to the importance of Balthasar’s aesthetics even “after the death of God.”

As Richard Kearney has observed, phenomenology returns to theology a sense of the importance of spirit becoming "flesh”—an imperative which can be lost in the edifices of onto-theology. Applied to art, we are given a theological imperative to experience "truth," "beauty," and ultimately divine beauty not just with our minds, but with the full range of perceptual resources accorded us by our bodies; i.e., an incarnational theology of the experience of art and revelation which stands against any kind of de-empiricizing, overly abstract theory.

Chapter 6 examines Balthasar’s dramatics as a key to his aesthetics, drawing on Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” to ask once again what it means for the work of art to be original and unique. For

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Benjamin, the unique aura of the authentic, miraculous work of art is lost in the age of technology; the bodily presence and relationality of the theatre is eclipsed by the fragmented, mediated phenomenon of the cinema. The terms in which Balthasar unfolds his theo-drama centred on the Christ-event in history rehabilitate some of these lost qualities and so the possibility of a christological aesthetics gains further traction. Balthasar’s dramatics help restore the bodily, narrative dimensions of art in an age of technologization and the fragmentation of the self, pointing towards a new “universalism” as human culture is included in the divine-human theo-drama.

Finally, Chapter 7 leaves behind the aesthetics and dramatics in order to investigate the third section of Balthasar’s “triptych,” his theological “logic.” Balthasar’s Theo-Logic, in its philosophically-oriented phenomenology of truth, yields a phenomenology of art as dialogue, which throughout Theo-Logic gradually comes to be described in theological terms as superabundantly “more” than dialogue. In brief, Theo-Logic commends itself to a hermeneutical approach to the question of art’s origin. Truth, for Balthasar, can be described as mystery, encounter, and openness; these qualities are manifested in artistic form and provide a model for existence in relation to the world and to God.
I: Context

And, first, wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty; while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory.

John Calvin, Institutes V

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
   Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty”

This chapter aims to contextualize Balthasar’s project of “theological aesthetics” in relation to contemporary conversations about theology and the arts in an effort to better understand his ongoing contribution to interdisciplinary exploration. In revisiting Balthasar’s theological aesthetics with “theology and the arts” in mind, I hope to address two problematic fissures related to the contemporary interdisciplinary arena of theological aesthetics, the growing field of enquiry which aims to provide (as in Richard Viladesau’s typology) a theological account of human “sensation, beauty, and art.”¹ The first is the ‘external’ chasm which currently exists between theology and contemporary art and art theory; the second, the ‘internal’ division between Balthasarian theological aesthetics and the current theology and the arts conversation.

I begin by discussing the difficulties of reconciling Balthasar’s famous interest in beauty with contemporary, “anti-aesthetic” iterations of art theory. While there are fruitful areas of dialogue, in general Balthasar’s work—with its strong emphasis on Beauty—operates considerably removed from this discourse (although as we shall see, there are signs they both converge on Heidegger). I then turn to a brief outline of twentieth-century theologies of art, both Protestant and Catholic, with Balthasar’s concerns in mind. With all of these varied paradigms in view, I take as examples three recent modest critiques of Balthasar’s project in order to illustrate the terms by which his theology is usually brought into conversation with the arts: by the Catholic theologian Richard Viladesau, the evangelical theologian and art historian William Dyrness, and a Reformed critique which draws on the notable Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff. Their concerns point to the issues which must be addressed in this study.

**Theology and the Artworld: Aesthetics and Anti-Aesthetics**

“All beauty is the word that shall be our first.” Amidst the horrors of the twentieth century, Balthasar elects to begin his theology with the oft-neglected term “beauty.” In considering Balthasar’s theological aesthetics in relation to twentieth and twenty-first century art and art history, however, what is immediately obvious is the disconnect between the grand theologies of beauty of the Christian tradition whence Balthasar is writing and the realities of contemporary art. The influential art theorist James Elkins

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2 *Gl1*, 18.
has noted that the important “revivals of beauty” initiated in twentieth-century theology by thinkers like Karl Barth and Jacques Maritain (and by extension, Balthasar) have “gone entirely unnoticed by the artworld,” which bears more affinities with the “anti-aesthetic” paradigm described by art theorist Hal Foster in the 1980s. As Foster wrote in his seminal text *The Anti-Aesthetic* (the year after Balthasar’s “theological aesthetics” appeared in English):

"Anti-aesthetic" ... signals that the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas, is in question here: the ideas that aesthetic experience exists apart, without "purpose," all but beyond history, or that art can now effect a world at once (inter)subjective, concrete, and universal--a symbolic totality. Like "postmodernism," then, "anti-aesthetic" marks a cultural position on the present: are categories afforded by the aesthetic still valid? ... "Anti-aesthetic" also signals a practice, cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic (e.g., feminist art) or rooted in a vernacular--that is, to forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm.

Foster’s notion of the “anti-aesthetic,” while hardly a catchall for the diverse spectrum of creativity in the postmodern age, is a helpful tool for thinking through the state of contemporary art. The animating concern of many contemporary theorists and artists is that the “utterly, gloriously useless” status of the aesthetic as conceived of in earlier periods may effectively “disable” any kind of legitimate ethical, social or political engagement. Here we have an image of beauty as a frail, ephemeral quality unable to

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effect real change in the struggle for a just society.\textsuperscript{5} As theologian and phenomenologist Edward Farley puts it, this is the spectre of a “bourgeois” Beauty which remains perniciously “idolatrous, seductive, effete, amoral, elitist, essentialist and quaint.”\textsuperscript{6}

The most obvious critique of this elitist conception of beauty is Marxist in tone, where “aesthetic” describes not a “human universal” but a “piece of bourgeois ideology”: “The function of this way of thinking is to inscribe bourgeois social relations into nature, so placing them beyond the reach of social change ... In seeing something as an ‘end in itself,’ I immortalize it, lift it out of the world of practical concerns” and so obscure its necessary connection to “the process of production and consumption on which human life depends.”\textsuperscript{7} Writers as diverse as Hal Foster, Alexander Nehemas, and Terry Eagleton have been concerned to reiterate the important point that art is related to the field of human desires, materiality, and the real conditions of human cultural flourishing, not just to ideal, “universal” qualities of beauty.\textsuperscript{8} This does not necessarily mean “anti-aesthetics” must be against beauty in all its manifestations. Instead, it is a certain tradition of philosophical aesthetics which has come under fire. Beauty has thus

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\textsuperscript{7} Roger Scruton, \textit{Beauty} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 62.
become, as Arthur Danto puts it, an “abused” concept in contemporary art theory, though this is not to say it has been completely abandoned.⁹

If this is the troubled path of beauty, religion has not fared much better. Though it is a vast oversimplification, and there are many exceptions (Bill Viola, Anish Kapoor, and Anselm Kiefer being some of the most obvious), it seems fair to say that the art of the early twenty-first century generally concerns itself with negotiating political and social theoretical orientations, questions of form and material, and identity politics rather than transcendental or spiritual approaches, even as it still relies heavily on modern(ist) institutions which privilege the autonomy of the work of art and reinforce the idea of a “privileged aesthetic realm.” Moreover, be it Banksy’s provocative graffiti art, Ai Weiwei’s dissident sunflower seeds or Damian Hirst’s rotting shark carcases, it is hard to separate the contemporary realm of artistic expression from both its social context (in the multi-million dollar artworld and in the sociopolitical realities of the global village) and its political aspirations—it may well seem at times as though art in the twenty-first century is wedded to immanent concerns such as power, society, economics, and the politics of representation, with beauty and religion discarded husks.

Beyond the anti-aesthetic, however, there are many complex threads of art history and criticism in play in the contemporary situation. Beauty does occasionally reassert itself

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in the philosophy of art, as in Elaine Scarry’s writings on beauty, art, and ethics, or in art history (particularly notable for standing against the grain here are Alexander Nehemas and Dave Hickey). ¹⁰ There is also a growing awareness of the close link between art and the divine, particularly in the ontology of the image, as evinced in the work of historians like Hans Belting. ¹¹ Belting, in his landmark 1994 study Likeness and Presence, draws attention to the difference between our present-day “age of art” and the medieval “Era of the Image,” where art the way we presently understand it simply did not yet exist—the image had a sacramental quality, presencing what it depicted. For the works of art in Belting’s medieval purview, the “origin” of the work of art comes not just in the hand of an individual artists, but in such “legends of veracity” as the imprint left on the veil of Veronica, or the “enduring physical impression” of Christ’s face or body on a cloth (as with the miraculous legend of the Mandylion that attended the ancient city of Edessa). ¹² The painting, like the icon, is physically as well as spiritually a medium of presence.

Parallel to Belting’s art-historical insights, there has also been of late an “iconic turn” in art theory, where artworks have come to be seen not just within the semiotic or cultural studies model of the artwork, where meaning is understandable only linguistically, but as visual carriers of presence that essentially unveil themselves to the viewer on their


¹² Belting, 4. There are links here as well to the Shroud of Turin – Jesus’ physical body leaving a trace of its presence.
own terms. Whereas past paradigms attempted to “tame” the artwork through covering it over with layers of meaning, as Keith Moxey describes it “works of art are objects now regarded as more appropriately encountered than interpreted.”

Such an ontology of the image, emerging within phenomenological art theory, serves as a “striking contrast to the dominant disciplinary paradigms of the recent past.”

Moxey traces this development within art theory, perhaps not unexpectedly, to Heidegger (specifically “The Origin of the Work of Art”) and Merleau-Ponty, citing figures and texts with whom we will deal in later chapters, as well as to Hans Belting, Georges Didi-Huberman, James Elkins, and the late Gottfried Boehm. I have also sought to identify an “iconic” philosophy of art in the work of the French phenomenologist (and Balthasar’s pupil) Jean-Luc Marion. For Marion, the modernist painting is an “idol,” “irresistible” to our gaze and exerting a kind of indissoluble power over the viewing eye. Yet Marion seems to suggest there is still a potential passage from the enclosed and encompassing spectacle of the “idol” to the translucent threshold of the “icon”—and thus in the

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14 Moxey, 132.
margins of his thought the possibility of an “iconic” theology of art, though of course different in tenor from what Didi-Huberman and Moxey have in mind.

Leaving these subtle paths of convergence aside, there is a more basic methodological question to be asked about the relevance of Balthasarian theological aesthetics. The Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman once famously remarked that “aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to birds”—a complex discipline with little relation to what it purports to describe. Thus one may ask whether artists legitimately need aesthetics, let alone something as arcane as theological aesthetics. When it comes to drawing on a classical theologian such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, the question of how to go about bringing his deeply confessional, metaphysical theological aesthetics into conversation with contemporary art—in pursuit of a dialogical “theology of art”—may seem like a confusion of categories. We must first ask: does Balthasar’s work fall into an outmoded view of beauty and the aesthetic, relying on a classical/Thomist ontology which has been thoroughly diverted and “deconstructed” by Kant, Heidegger, and Derrida as ontotheology (as Richard Viladesau has suggested) on the one hand and discounted as a piece of bourgeois ideology (by art critics like Hal Foster and Terry

17 Barnett Newman, Selected Writings and Interviews, ed. J.P. O’Neill (New York: Knopf, 1990), 304. See also Paul Mattick, Jr., “Aesthetics and Anti-Aesthetics in the Visual Arts,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 51:2 (Spring 1993): 253-259. Mattick details the influence of the “anti-aesthetic” on art and theory, and calls more modestly for a situational aesthetics which would move away from “such ahistorical concepts as ‘aesthetic experience’” in favour of studying art as an historical, cultural force. “Art, once securely positioned as the highest secular religion of modern society... has now become an area of confusion and contestation.”
Eagleton) on the other? Secondly, in the very decades when Balthasar was reintroducing into theology an analogical relationship between earthly and divine beauty, a drastic change was well underway in art and aesthetics which would effectively move consideration of beauty to the periphery of the “artworld.” Arthur Danto has characterized this twentieth-century shift, which he traces back to Duchamp and the Dadaists and forward into the heterogenous landscape of contemporary art, as the “End of Art.”\(^\text{18}\) Beauty no longer occupies its historical position as the transcendental “centre” of the arts; "truth," having lost its connection to beauty, is similarly out of fashion.\(^\text{19}\) How then can a theology, which claims beauty as a “first word” and links the "truth of the world" to divine self-revelation, remain relevant to the diverse landscape of “anti-aesthetic” contemporary art?

This is an open question. Yet, as shall be demonstrated, Balthasar’s phenomenology of art is at times both “anti-aesthetic,” critiquing a certain type of “partial aesthetics,” and “iconic,” centered on the revelatory power of the image. As we shall see, there are resources in Balthasar’s work for a rapprochement between theological aesthetics and the arts.

\(^{18}\) See Arthur Danto, The Abuse of Beauty, 18-21. For Danto, the (Hegelian) term “the End of Art” is not an entirely negative assessment: art after the End of Art has, if anything, a fuller range of potentialities available to it, of which beauty is one among many.

\(^{19}\) There is, however, a small but persistent tradition of philosophers examining the truth of art: one could examine Herman Rapaport, Is there truth in art? (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Lambert Zuidervaart, Artistic truth: aesthetics, discourse, and imaginative disclosure (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
Contemporary Theological Aesthetics

In addition to the wide gulf between theological aesthetics in a Balthasarian key and contemporary art and theory, there is also a rupture or fissure internal to Christian theology between “theological aesthetics” as pioneered by Balthasar and the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of what is variously termed theological aesthetics/aesthetic theology/“theology and the arts,” though the borders of each area of discourse are not clearly defined.

Theological aesthetics is a new name for something very old. Though the intertwining or “interlacing”\(^2^0\) of art and religion is an inestimably ancient phenomenon, the past several decades have seen a renewed interest in intentionally studying art itself as a \textit{locus theologicus}, a site “where new theological insight is generated, and where religious experience is possible.”\(^2^1\) As a growing number of thinkers have pointed out over the past several decades, art is an area of human experience theologians cannot


\(^{21}\) Davide Zordan and Stefanie Knauss, “Following the Traces of God in Art: Aesthetic Theology as Foundational Theology,” \textit{CrossCurrents} (March 2013), 5. Zordan and Knauss sum up Balthasar’s contribution to theology and the arts succinctly: by combining “foundational theology” (“how God’s revelation can be perceived and received by human beings”) and “a dogmatic theme” (“the doctrine of participation in the divine life”), Hans Urs von Balthasar “has had a decisive influence on the development of theology and in particular aesthetic theology” which far surpasses the contributions of those, like Tillich, whose existential methods (e.g. correlation) have subsequently fallen out of favour.
afford to neglect. Moreover, to investigate the truth, beauty, and meaning of art as an horizon whereby the divine or spiritual is in some way disclosed is a task which seems to have taken on a particular urgency in the contemporary situation, where it has become commonplace to suggest art galleries have in a certain sense become the new churches. Art is wondrous. It has the potential to move, provoke, and engender a new way of seeing by immersing us more deeply in the world opened by the senses, and enables new, imaginative modes of understanding the fundamental questions of human existence. It resonates deeply with questions of ultimate meaning and authentic theology. Thus accordingly, in academic theology, as well as in individual churches and

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23 For a popular-level discussion of this trope, see for example Alain de Botton, “Should art really be for its own sake alone?” The Guardian (20 January 2012), available from http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/20/art-museums-churches.
creative communities, this has resulted in a vibrant contemporary conversation surrounding “theology and the arts.”

One way of defining theological aesthetics is as a recovery of the often neglected category of beauty, so that its central task is to constructively probe “the religious aspect to the experience of the beautiful that is revelatory and redemptive”—seeing in sensory perception itself a gateway to theology—while simultaneously “affirm[ing] the human capacity to know and love God as Beauty” precisely through such earthly

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“experiences of the beautiful.”\textsuperscript{25} Such an approach, which certainly bears resemblance to Balthasar’s project, well describes the work of David Bentley Hart, John Navone, or (in an earlier generation) Sergius Bulgakov.\textsuperscript{26} While recognizing that the term remains “difficult to define,” one way of further refining this definition would suggest that theological aesthetics at its most basic is theology which employs the traditional vocabulary of philosophical aesthetics “recast ... into theological terms,” so that the modern science of aesthetics developed by Alexander Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century becomes a lens through which to interpret the shape of Christian revelation.

Yet theological aesthetics can also be defined with reference to art and creativity, as in the work of Richard Viladesau, Jeremy Begbie, and Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu. The intersection of theology and the arts thus fits into a broader discussion about the nature of theological aesthetics as a microcosm of the whole. Human experience of art is closely related to aesthetic (i.e., sensory) experience in general, including our experience of beauty in the realm of natural forms. So too, however, theological aesthetics finds an important source in theological investigation of art which is not especially beautiful, and which in fact stands in stark opposition to the Grand Theory of Beauty and prefers to consider art within a different configuration of social and cultural

practices. Theological aesthetics must then include a theology of art, alongside a
theological aesthetics of nature, a theological aesthetics of human sensation, as well as
a *theological* aesthetics proper which deals with the beauty of God. Yet these aims often
cross over and overlap; to list just one example, Kathryn Alexander’s recent book spends
a significant amount of time discussing a theological aesthetics of nature through the
work of one particular artist (namely, Andy Goldsworthy) whose work engages the
natural environment.\(^\text{27}\)

Both of these avenues (beauty and art) are important, and there are many more ways in
which theological aesthetics is evolving as a discipline. Theologians from a range of
ecclesial traditions have sought to build bridges between the estranged worlds of
theology and the arts as they exist in late modernity, whether art is seen as a model for
theology, a source of revelation, or within the context of larger theologies of culture,
creation, redemption, or eschatology. The conversation has expanded by leaps and
bounds in the past ten years. Contributions over the course of the last decade by a
number of British theologians have shaped the current state of discourse around such
loci as art as sacrament and ongoing source of revelation (David Brown), art as model
for theology (Jeremy Begbie), and art as secular parable (Timothy Gorringe).\(^\text{28}\)

\(^{27}\) See chapter 3, “Nature Revealed: Religious Insight in the Art of Andy
\(^{28}\) Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*; Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*;
Gorringe, *Earthly Visions: Theology and the Challenges of Art*. See also Jeremy Begbie,
ed. *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books,
2000).
recent interdisciplinary ventures have sought to move from the starting points of philosophy and literature (David Jasper), art history (William Dyrness) and “natural theology” (Anthony Monti) to a deeper, richer dialogue between art and Christian faith.\(^{29}\) One major strand in the contemporary conversation, represented by Jeremy Begbie, speaks of “theology through the arts,” using insights from the arts to illuminate theological themes.

It may be possible to distinguish in some sense (as David Tracy did in a different way in his *The Analogical Imagination*) between Catholic and Protestant approaches to theological aesthetics. The excellent collection of essays *Theological Aesthetics After Von Balthasar* opens by reiterating Balthasar’s claim (made in reference to Gerhard Nebel) that “Protestant theological aesthetics,” if one can speak of such a thing, is founded not on a “permanent or stable form” such as the analogy of being, but must rather proceed without such an underlying ontological structure, focusing on the aesthetic experience of the subject rather than the “appearance” of an eternal Beauty in the artwork.\(^{30}\) Protestant theological aesthetics are thus more likely to be occasional and provisional, looking for “events” of transcendence in the arts. Beauty is not


\(^{30}\) See *Theological Aesthetics After von Balthasar*, xvi. As Balthasar writes, however: “Our real purpose here, however, is not to place a Protestant and a Catholic aesthetics side by side as varieties of Christian aesthetics.” GL1, 68.
ontologized, but rather presented as a flash of insight. The Catholic strand, on the other hand, seems to prefer to speak of theological aesthetics which move in a more philosophical direction, searching for adequate accounts of art with reference to truth and beauty (whether these are transcendentals in the traditional sense or not), seeking approaches both theological and phenomenological in method.  

Finding a Place for Balthasar in Contemporary Theological Aesthetics

Both Catholic and Protestant theologians, however, have struggled to find a place for the daunting spectre of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. One way of conceptualizing Balthasar’s grand theological project is as a “system,” a seemingly obvious choice for works auspiciously belonging to the genre of ‘systematic theology.’ The immediate problem in doing so in Balthasar’s case, however, is that the Swiss theologian “does not approach the presentation in a systematic way”—rather than beginning with philosophical or theological prolegomena, he begins with the “midpoint,” namely Christ, and works outward, in a spiraling, poetic style which often bears more in common with poetry than theology. This is far from accidental. What Balthasar sought to express and model was not a systematic theology per se, but an originary, artistic “beholding”

31 In addition to Viladesau’s Theological Aesthetics, see also Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts: encountering God through music, art and rhetoric (New York: Paulist Press, 2000); Aidan Nichols, Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); also his earlier The Art of God Incarnate (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980).

around which all words, images, and finally ethical actions must coalesce. Thus

*Herrlichkeit* is itself not unlike an allusive, evocative work of art. Readers of Balthasar’s trilogy have realized this instinctively; in one early review of the then-new English translation of *The Glory of the Lord*, Thomas O’Meara writes that “Balthasar has given us in his systems works of art.” Whether or not they are *great* works of art is of course up for debate – the same reviewer was inclined to say that his “originality lies in structure more than in content.”33 Yet this intuition about the nature of Balthasar’s writing is shared by those such as Aidan Nichols, Edward Oakes, and D.C. Schindler who have served as Balthasar’s primary interlocutors. Balthasar’s theological aesthetics proceeds by means of a creative, interdisciplinary *ressourcement*—of the German intellectual and poetic tradition in *Der Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele*, of the church fathers in works on Maximus the Confessor and Origen, of French literature (Bernanos, Peguy) and Greek drama, as well as a range of other topics. He frequently has recourse to Hegel, Herder, Schelling, Schiller, and significantly Goethe, whose “way of seeing”34 deeply informs his doctrine of divine revelation. These diverse sources along with many others coalesce, however, into a singular ‘Balthasarian’ vision centred around “seeing the form.”

Balthasar’s theological aesthetics gain their strength precisely from their unique and creative re-interpretation of tradition, perhaps most strikingly so in the ten figures put forward as representatives of “lay” and “clerical” styles in volumes II and III of *The Glory

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of the Lord: Irenaeus, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius (Denys), Anselm and Bonaventure in the first, and Dante, John of the Cross, Pascal, Hamann, Soloviev, Hopkins, and Peguy in the second. It is a catalogue of theologians, philosophers, and poets alike, joined by the innumerable others whose works populate the pages of The Glory of the Lord.

If this, then, is the nature of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, how does it relate to the contemporary area of study of the same name? Balthasar’s project must, of course, be seen within the broader context of aesthetics, not just the German tradition to which he arguably belongs (Kant, Hegel, Goethe, Heidegger) but the entire weight of philosophical tradition: both the “classical” paradigm mediated through patristic, medieval and Renaissance interlocutors and the modern age. For Balthasar and those who have followed in his wake, theological aesthetics ought to be in large part a matter of retrieval and, perhaps most importantly, of integration—recovering and reconstructing from the voices of the past a polyphonic witness to glory revealed.

However, the method of creative ressourcement and synthesis Balthasar employs in his pursuit of an integrative theological aesthetics has been largely eschewed in favour of what might be termed dialogical approaches to theologizing about the arts. One stream, which typifies a kind of ‘first wave’ of postwar theologies of art and beauty, follows the general posture adopted by the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, an approach which seeks to correlate human aesthetic experience with existential “ultimate concern”: “All
art is religious not because everything of beauty stems from God… but because all art expresses a depth-content, a position toward the Unconditional.” Tillich was especially keen to discern the human orientation toward the divine in expressive art, including German Expressionism as practiced by painters like Emil Nolde. Both Tillich and Balthasar see the artistic and religious impulses as deeply intertwined, using the metaphysical language of *eros* to describe the force which drives the subject towards ecstatic contemplation of the expressions of both art and revelation. Yet Tillich’s concern is *style*, the way particular cultural and historical artifacts such as artworks disclose an orientation towards the ultimate. Balthasar, though he devotes two volumes to theological “style,” is more interested in recovering an understanding of *form*—supremely, the Christian “form of forms,” Christ, who becomes a “measure” for all other created forms. For Balthasar, following Barth, to concentrate on the “address to Being” which can be found in art (the zone of human orientation) may obscure the “address from Being” (the ‘objective’ self-communication of God)—the true sphere of Christian revelation.

Tillich’s existential and correlative approach is typical of one dominant trend in the literature in the area of theology and the arts, wherein the work of specific artists is investigated in terms of longing for the divine—a kind of question/answer structure. John and Jane Dillenberger are Tillich’s natural successors in this regard, carrying

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forward his project in the realm of art history; with an eye to biographical and historical context, their pioneering work has drawn spiritual and existential themes out of the work of artists as diverse as Wassily Kandinsky (who wrote the enigmatic *The Spiritual in Art*) and Andy Warhol.\(^{36}\) The Dutch Reformed thinker H.R. Rookmaaker similarly followed this basic impulse, yet with a more negative evaluation of the current state of “the spiritual in art”; twentieth-century art history is read as a (post)modernist quest for theological meaning, which (at least for Rookmaaker and his disciple, Francis Schaeffer) much of the time ends “below the line of despair.”\(^{37}\)

Tillich’s theology of culture—as manifested in his theology of art—is able to make a space for genuine religious experience (being grasped by “ultimate concern,” for instance) in secular forms. Tillich thus remarks of Van Gogh’s evocative *The Mulberry Tree* that it not only manifests the overwhelming “power of being” but possesses more “sacredness” than much religious art. What is missing in Tillich’s approach in particular is a sense of integration over time—a more ‘catholic’ sense that any particular form, Christic or not, emerges or can be discerned in expressive art over the centuries. To examine selected works of art synchronically in terms of what they say about our relationship to the divine is useful as far as it goes. However, it lacks the larger


perspective Balthasar’s approach yields where all art is chthonically related to the self-giving of God through earthly forms in time and history.\textsuperscript{38}

A perhaps more genuinely interdisciplinary approach is associated with more recent ventures such as the work of Jeremy Begbie, William Dyrness, and Daniel Siedell.\textsuperscript{39} Each of these Protestant thinkers has engaged with rigour the vexing question of how art and theology ought to inform each other while remaining autonomous. Siedell is concerned with overdetermining eschatologies that annex the meaning of art to a prefabricated Christian framework, preferring instead to let art interpret itself on its own terms before Christian theology weighs in on the discussion. Begbie similarly treats music as a separate sphere to theology, but allows it to penetrate and inform Christian doctrine and praxis. Dyrness’ poetic theology continues Balthasar’s intimations about the role of desire in theology and art in fruitful directions. Such nuanced theological responses serve as an answer to the investigations of secular art theorists such as James Elkins, who have sought to ask the question from the opposite perspective—what place does religion, and Christianity in particular, have in contemporary art?\textsuperscript{40} Elkins reads art history as a kind of history of the secularization of images, to the point that non-ironic religious piety can no longer easily coexist with artistic integrity and creativity, at least in

\textsuperscript{38} See GL 1, 679.
the perception of the artworld (the network of institutions which define art in the contemporary situation). For him, religion occupies a strangely excluded space on the periphery of the artworld, and he is generally not optimistic about its prospects for reintegration. Siedell, Begbie, and Dyrness, on the other hand, each situate art and artmaking within a larger theological schema, thus suggesting that art itself is already a theological activity and so secular and religious art can both be sources for constructive theologizing. None of these approaches, however, make significant mention of Balthasar nor follow his ontological bent.

In his scholarship on Balthasar, Stephen Garrett has asked whether there is in fact a quality inherent to Trinitarian theology itself, which has experienced an unprecedented renaissance of its own in the last century, uniquely hospitable to aesthetic categories. Garrett reads Barth and Balthasar in terms of “God’s Beauty-in-Act,” which in turn provides a valuation of earthly beauty in light of redemption. Similarly, Patrick Sherry has investigated art and beauty in relation to the Holy Spirit, which continues the Trinitarian focus of much contemporary theological aesthetics. There has also been much renewed interest in Jonathan Edwards, the great 17th century American theologian and philosopher whose Trinitarian aesthetics are linked with a coherent

aesthetic philosophy. Anthony Monti’s natural theology of the arts proceeds from a more analytic direction, while David Bentley Hart, on the other hand, is perhaps the most Balthasarian of contemporary thinkers working in the area of theological aesthetics, synthesizing patristic sources and continental interlocutors to articulate a broad Orthodox theology of beauty, truth, and the *analogia entis* over against postmodern discourses of *difference* and a Tillichian emphasis on the “symbolic.”

Ben Quash, a Balthasar scholar at the forefront of post-Balthasarian theological aesthetics, notes that “it is sometimes remarked that scholarship in the area of theology and the arts is frequently shallow because its practitioners employ relatively few critical tools, and because it is prone to the deployment of examples from the arts only when they are deemed useful for the illustration of a preconceived theological point.” The contemporary landscape of theological aesthetics is so diverse that it is difficult to judge the accuracy of this characterization, or to make any sweeping statements about its aims and methods. However, it is true that many “theologies of art” face ongoing problems not of breadth but of depth and relevance. It seems obvious that much “theology of art” as it has evolved over the past two decades does not seriously engage the post-religious, post-aesthetic nature of contemporary art and culture, a society which has seen and experienced not just the “death of God” (Thomas J.J. Altizer, John Caputo) but the “End of Art” (Arthur Danto, Donald Kuspit). Accordingly, it suffers from

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42 Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 24-25. Tillich does embrace the analogy of Being but Hart feels his emphasis on the symbolic collapses the distinction into oblivion.

43 Quash, *Found Theology*, xvi-xvii.
a lack of points of connection to contemporary philosophical discussions surrounding notions of God, art, and the sacred, such as Jean-Luc Marion’s “theological turn” in phenomenology or Gianni Vattimo’s secular “weakening” of philosophy (on the one hand) and Danto’s “End of Art” and Elkin’s “Strange Place of Religion” (on the other). Though contemporary theological aesthetics has largely moved away from the “top-down,” transcendental approaches to truth and beauty of the past (as in the Neo-Thomistic tradition) towards more practical and experiential methodologies, it is clear that there must be additional conceptual bridges built between theology and art theory, art history, and the philosophy of art. In the past few years, thinkers like Siedell and Matthew Milliner (Wheaton College) have drawn attention to the need for theologies of art to have “art-historical,” not just philosophical, conversation partners. For a theological art criticism will be attentive to not only the theoretical underpinnings of art but to its actual practice by flesh-and-blood artists. Positive recent examples of this range from Jonathan Anderson and Leonard Aldea’s recent (separate) work on the Zurich Dadaists to Eleanor Heartney’s work on Chris Ofili and Andy Warhol. The work of T.J. Gorringe and E. John Walford are other positive steps in this direction from theologians.

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Other contemporary movements in recent theological aesthetics have helpfully moved the discussion towards issues of community and experience. Frank Burch Brown’s pioneering work was concentrated on the use (and abuse) of art in relation to the sacred, investigating themes such as kitsch, aestheticism, and authenticity, and there continues to be significant interest in his ongoing work in developing contextual theologies of art. The late Alejandro García-Rivera and his pupil, Cecilia González-Andrieu, have paired an interest in the communal dimensions of art and theology and the experience of wonder (asombro), and moreover drawn illuminating connections between our experience and interpretation of art and our ability to live in community.46 David Brown’s contention, expressed in a more moderate form by T.J. Gorringe, is that art ought to inform and, in some cases, correct theological tradition; it is a bona fide locus of new and ongoing revelation, and so deserves to be heeded (on the part of the faithful community) as a source of theological insight—as indeed it is in Balthasar’s oeuvre, though naturally within a different model of the reception of tradition than Brown’s Anglican paradigm.47

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New directions in theological aesthetics continue to emerge. Kathryn Alexander’s *Saving Beauty: A Theological Aesthetics of Nature* is a particularly compelling interdisciplinary investigation which points to a direction likely to be taken by subsequent studies. The field of “theopoetics” as articulated by theologians such as Catherine Keller, echoing but not imitating the earlier movement by the same name associated with Amos Wilder, is another significant conversation partner to theological aesthetics. This area of discourse eschews “theopoetry”—speaking of the traditional Christian God in poetic terms—and instead sees poetics itself as generative of the divine, thus taking something of a more liberal approach than William Dyrness’ similarly-named *Poetic Theology*. Also worth mentioning are a proliferation of studies of theologians such as Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Bernard Lonergan which bring to the fore aspects of their thought amenable to “aesthetic” interpretations even if these are

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48 The popularity of theological aesthetics over the past two decades owes much to the publication of Gesa Elspeth Thiessen’s edited volume *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), which brings together a significant range of primary sources from Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine to Tillich, Barth, and Garcia-Rivera. The field has also come into its own thanks to the publication of the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), edited by Frank Burch Brown, which straddles both practice and theory and investigates a range of aesthetic loci (art, symbol, beauty, imagination, perception) in theological and religious perspective.


not fully developed by the authors themselves. Finally, there is also a groundswell of interest in recovering the aesthetic insights of Catholic thinkers of an earlier generation such as Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson, whose writings on art are significant examples of creative and dynamic neo-Thomist interaction with contemporary philosophies of art.

As the preceding summary makes clear, it is exceptionally difficult to generalize about contemporary theological aesthetics. However, as the following examples illustrate, there are a number of important issues to be addressed in terms of assessing Balthasar’s ongoing relevance to this conversation which seem to recur whenever Balthasar’s name is raised in recent theological aesthetics. Two recent constructive theological aesthetics which have made use of Balthasar’s work—one Catholic, one Protestant—illustrate the uneasy terms in which his relevance to theology and the arts is usually unfolded. Both of these projects are excellent on their own terms as attempts to grapple theologically with art from the standpoint of contemporary theology, but miss out on further implications of Balthasar’s thought for their interdisciplinary projects.

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Richard Viladesau

Firstly, the primary problem facing the application of Balthasar’s theo-aesthetics to contemporary efforts to investigate art as a *locus theologicus* is articulated by one of the most prominent voices in the “theology and the arts” dialogue in contemporary Catholic theology, Richard Viladesau. Viladesau contends that Balthasar’s aesthetics, though interdisciplinary in style, are in terms of theological method too “intra-ecclesial” to effectively dialogue with other areas of discourse. This criticism exemplifies a common tendency in recent evaluations of Balthasar that see him as working within a “specific Christian language,” suitable for injecting a renewed vitality into Christian doctrine, but ill-suited for dialogue (or Tillichian apologetic engagement) with those outside the Christian faith.\(^5^2\) For Viladesau, this inward focus in Balthasar’s method is particularly problematic in his reliance on what he describes as the anachronistic medieval ontology at play in the traditional version of the Thomist doctrine of the transcendentals.\(^5^3\) In this view, Balthasar’s strong emphasis on classical ontology—seeing earthly truth, goodness, and beauty primarily in their relation to eternal Being—involves a departure from our

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\(^5^3\) Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 29-38.
lived experience of art, and a failure to accept the postmetaphysical, post-ontotheological paradigm art and philosophy inhabit after Heidegger and Derrida.

Moreover, Viladesau points out that Balthasar’s theology may get off on the wrong foot by taking Christ as a methodological starting-point—hardly accepted as an objective “measure” by those outside the Christian church—rather than seeking to establish common ground between doctrine and culture. A “self-authenticating” apologetics may simply conceal a fideism which leaves little place for reason.\(^5^4\) Viladesau is in essence concerned that Balthasar’s theological aesthetics are liable to be overly “subjective”; he asks, giving the example of other ‘beautiful’ religious figures from history (Socrates or the Buddha, for example) how one might objectively “judge the beauty of Christ” in relation to these other beauties other than by one’s own internal sense of beauty.\(^5^5\) In pursuit of objectivity, Viladesau proposes instead a fundamental theology based on Rahner’s “transcendental method,” as filtered through Bernard Lonergan—a methodology that examines not only the “intra-ecclesial” content of systematic theology but dialogically engages with other cultural and philosophical “specialties.”\(^5^6\) John Dadosky provides here the helpful language of “specific-identity focus” and “general-identity focus” as a more constructive way of framing Balthasar’s project in relation to other functional specialties. For Dadosky, Balthasar has an intra-Christian,

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 36. This is a criticism often leveled at, for example, Karl Barth—an authentic theology of culture must mediate between theology and culture, including the arts, not just set itself up in opposition to cultural forms.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 38.
specific-identity focus which centers on his understanding of Christ as supreme form. Yet this does not prevent him from making use of “categories from the cultural matrix,” specifically from the realm of art and aesthetics. Balthasar is thus best thought of as a “specific-identity” thinker, but whose insights are still relevant beyond the internecine concerns of Catholic theology.

Viladesau, for his part, proposes adopting a more explicitly phenomenological approach to “theological aesthetics”—which he defines, expanding the term from its use in Balthasar’s work, as the quest for a “theological account” of imagination, sensation, beauty and art. Following Lonergan, instead of beginning with the transcendentals conceived of ontologically, Viladesau reintroduces the philosophical imperative of developing “a phenomenology of the subject in the act of knowing.” “This method ... does not take for granted the principles of classical metaphysics and epistemology – for example, existence by participation and the analogy of being ... – but attempts rather to validate both metaphysics and epistemology in an ‘experiment.’”

Though he did not write extensively about beauty, Lonergan provides for Viladesau a way of thinking “transcendentally” about such qualities as truth, beauty, and goodness

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 121.
without structuring them into a Balthasarian metaphysic. In general, Lonergan’s emphasis is on the “perceivability” of such qualities, which is related to our “intention” as subjects. In the case of beauty, Viladesau suggests that the “satisfaction of the dynamism of intentionality” is found in our disinterested (in the Kantian sense) appreciation for it as an end in itself, the “joy and delight” inherent to the “aesthetic pattern.” For Viladesau, this approach may “make explicit another avenue of access to the “transcendental” way of affirmation of God’s existence” apart from traditional metaphysics. Beauty is not “conceived or projected as a transcendental idea”—the top-down approach Viladesau attributes to Balthasar—but becomes “actual” in the “very act of aesthetic joy.” This experimental, phenomenological investigation of the nature of aesthetic experience on the part of the subject leads Viladesau to consider the “conditions of possibility” under which the experience of beauty could arise; he subsequently suggests that “joyous affirmation of the form” must take as a condition of possibility an “ultimate Beauty.” Here Viladesau finds a fundamental theology with Kantian notes which then “takes the fact of aesthetic experience as its starting point” and finds not only absolute Beauty but “God as the absolute and necessary condition of possibility of such experience.”

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61 Ibid., 131-132.  
62 Ibid., 138.  
63 Ibid. For a different appropriation of Lonergan for the study of beauty and aesthetics, see Dadosky, The Eclipse and Recovery of Beauty: A Lonergan Approach.  
64 Viladesau, 125.
Unlike Balthasar, Viladesau thus embarks on a bidirectional bringing-together of “theology” and “aesthetics” in search of a “fundamental theological aesthetics”—one that will apply a Lonerganian, even Rahnerian “transcendental method” to the study of earthly sensation, art and beauty even as it strains towards a “theopoesis” (and explanatory “theopoetics”) shaped and enriched by its encounter with these three aesthetic loci. In brief, Viladesau defines “theological aesthetics” as comprising both “aesthetic theology” (moving ‘upwards’ from aesthetics to discourse about God, religious faith and theology) and a “narrowly defined” theological aesthetics (a “theological account” of imagination, the senses, beauty and art); while for Balthasar, “theological aesthetics” is about the beauty of Christian revelation, which forms an analogy to worldly beauty but ultimately “outstrips” it. Viladesau thus characterizes Balthasar’s approach as one which proceeds “from above,” while he seeks to build a more foundational, “transcendental” (in David Tracy’s sense of the word) theology “from below.”

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65 Viladesau, 19. The term “theopoetics” as it appears in Viladesau is somewhat distinct from historical uses of the term by Stanley Hopper, Amos Wilder, and in more recent years Catherine Keller and Callid Keefe-Perry; for an overview, see David Miller, “Theopoetry or Theopoetics?” Cross Currents 60:1 (2010): 6-23. Viladesau’s use of the term is linked instead to Garrett Green, Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989). Anne Carpenter’s recent Thomistic adoption of the term to describe Balthasar’s work is broadly speaking in line with Viladesau’s understanding of theopoetics. See her forthcoming Theo-Poetics: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Risk of Art and Being (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame, 2015).


67 Ibid., 37. By phrasing it in this way, however, it seems possible that what Viladesau terms “aesthetic theology” (the judicious application of the language of aesthetics to the content of Christian theology) is what Balthasar would have thought of as “theological aesthetics”! (For Balthasar the term “aesthetic theology” only applies to
William Dyrness

Reformed art historian William Dyrness has also made constructive use of Balthasar in his recent *Poetic Theology*, which articulates a “positive theology of desire” in art and culture using a method with a greater resemblance to Balthasar’s retrieval of *eros* than Karl Rahner’s similarly-named *dichtende theologie* or of either Catholic or process theology iterations of “theopoetics” (see note 26, above). Dyrness makes use of Balthasar precisely to answer the vexing question of “how it is possible for God to be present (or referenced) in the art object.”

Contrasting Balthasar’s theological aesthetics to those of Karl Barth, Jacques Maritain, and David Bentley Hart, Dyrness rightly outlines Balthasar’s theology of form as rooted in a “comprehensive (Thomist) doctrine of being,” where the presence of the “depths” is what allows the form to appear beautiful. Dyrness’ evaluation of Balthasar, coming from a Protestant perspective, is generally positive—for those interested in a “poetic theology,” Balthasar’s rich *oeuvre* yields both a theological aesthetics (the revelation of God in Christ as the “highest art”) and an “aesthetic theory” (namely, that “the power of beauty speaks of the divine beauty in which it is grounded.”) However, when it comes to art, Dyrness suggests: “While there are important implications here for the project of misguided, “rogue versions” of his project, which mistake earthly beauty for revelation. See also Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar’s Aesthetics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 6.


Dyrness, 133.
poetic theology, Balthasar makes no direct attempt to contribute to the question of how the process of human creativity participates in the aesthetic form of revelation – indeed, he has surprisingly little to say about the actual process of art-making.\textsuperscript{70}

Dyrness is also concerned, from a Protestant and Reformed perspective, about framing art in terms of a doctrine of participation (\textit{methexis}), preferring Jacques Maritain’s model of creativity based not on participation but incarnation. In Dyrness’ Reformed theological anthropology, the distortion of the \textit{imago dei} in humanity by sin and “brokenness” make “a direct appeal to a vision of glory” such as Balthasar offers an epistemological impossibility.\textsuperscript{71} Here, as with Nebel, “the beautiful can never stand as a bridge on its own, since in itself, like everything else, it stands under wrath.”\textsuperscript{72} The crux of Dyrness’ question, however, is about the artwork itself not just as a model for theology, but a medium in and through which God communicates or is manifested – a question which Balthasar seemingly evades. British theologian George Pattison similarly asks whether “by setting his sights on a ‘theological aesthetics’”—a theology in search of Johannine “glory” rather than a “theology of art” in the manner of Jeremy Begbie or Richard Viladesau—Balthasar has, in effect, “made a move that will ... obscure and frustrate a theological engagement with art, as we make, experience, and receive art in

\textsuperscript{70} Dyrness, 134.
\textsuperscript{71} Dyrness, 135.
\textsuperscript{72} This is from Balthasar’s treatment of Nebel in \textit{GL}1, 59.
our own time.” For Pattison and Dyrness, the lofty aims of Balthasar’s grand metaphysical project—to recover a history of glory—may simply be out of touch with contemporary aesthetics and artistic practice.

A Reformed Critique

A third, somewhat indirect critique of Balthasar’s relevance to continued attempts to define an adequate theology of art is best articulated by Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff. Wolterstorff’s contribution to the collection *Theological Aesthetics After Von Balthasar* takes aim at what he terms the “Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts,” which sees the artwork primarily as an autonomous object of contemplation. Wolterstorff does not mention Balthasar by name (strangely, given the context of the essay), taking aim instead at art theorists like Monroe Beardsley. In fact, on the surface Wolterstorff’s view does not seem to be completely incommensurable with Balthasar’s approach – he well understands that some works of art are “expressive of the holy” (in a given religio-cultural matrix) and perhaps even “play the sacramental function of revealing or manifesting God,” as in sacred art and music. Like Balthasar, he recognizes

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75 Ibid., 128.
that art cannot take the place of religion—the gallery or concert hall is not a superior venue for revelation than the church.

Yet this is also the point at which Wolterstorff’s approach to aesthetics calls Balthasar’s central analogy of “seeing the form”—crucial to his overall theological method in *Herrlichkeit*—into question. The roots of this implicit criticism extend back to Wolterstorff’s seminal book *Art in Action* (1970). In this text, which has set the tone for much Reformed thinking in the area of art and artmaking, Wolterstorff takes aim at the traditional understanding of “engaging works of art as objects of engrossed contemplation.” With an eye to such identifying features as the diverse expressions of art and creativity across the globe in variegated cultures; the public use(s) of art; the problematic features of the “institution of high art” as it exists in the West; and even the traditional way in which the “fine arts” are grouped and distinguished from one another, Wolterstorff concludes that art is not primarily about disinterested contemplation (what Hal Foster terms the “privileged aesthetic realm”)—though this certainly represents one way of appreciating art in the Western world—but rather is woven “into the fabric of human action.” Though the museum and the concert hall encourage a view of art as contemplation, where the social and even physical conditions of the gallery underline the notion that art is to yield “aesthetic satisfaction” only when experienced in perfect autonomy and separation from the world, such a view of art (as

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76 Ibid., 129.
propounded in particular by an earlier generation of thinkers such as Clive Bell or Roger Fry) ignores to its own detriment the real diversity of art and creativity, which goes far beyond the strictly delineated “fine arts” to, for example, architecture, craft, “folk” music (Wolterstorff asks us to consider a weaving or spinning song), and “low” art forms, not to mention works of “art” intended for ritual or devotional use. A Christian hymn, for example, may be beautiful, but it is clearly not intended to be contemplated for its own sake; it serves a social and sacred function.\(^\text{78}\) Or, to take another example, to take a tribal mask and display it as art in the isolated space of the gallery is not only to engage in a kind of aesthetic colonization but to lose sight of its use within a particular society, a role which is both social and religious, immanent and transcendent. To treat the artwork as a modernist art object (within the institutional context of the artworld) severs it from the cultural, temporal, spatial, and religious connections which give it meaning. Privileging disinterested contemplation may lose sight of the this-worldly embeddedness of art—its cultural and social context, which is where it makes sense. “Art—so often thought of as a way of getting out of the world—is man’s way of acting in the world. Artistically man acts.”\(^\text{79}\)

Wolterstorff’s critique of the institution of fine art fits well with both the diverse landscape of contemporary art as it has continued to evolve since his book was published in 1980, as well as more recent approaches to theorizing art such as the anti-

\(^{78}\) Wolterstorff, Art in Action, 169.  
^{79}\) Wolterstorff, 4-5.
aesthetic impulses of art theorists such as Hal Foster and Nicholas Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics.” These thinkers are interested in dismantling a certain post-Kantian understanding of art which privileges individual contemplation in favour of a more contextual, socially-aware schema. Bourriaud’s work in particular is concerned with demonstrating art’s place within the human social world, going so far as to characterize the zone of art and art making as a “social interstice” which subsists in the fecund spaces between cultural processes of meaning-creation and interaction. A relational aesthetics, such as can be seen in many works of contemporary art, thus rejects an individual approach to the artwork, conceived of as an object, in favour of a more communal, dialogical approach which sees artworks as terminals or loci of interpretation and social transformation. Bourriaud’s thesis, though controversial, has proved beneficial in understanding contemporary developments in performance art, video art, interdisciplinarity, and in particular the complex interactivities associated with digital technology and networking.80

Wolterstorff does not deal explicitly with Balthasar’s theological aesthetics in his work. He does, however, criticize aesthetic models “bewitched” by an outdated and misleading definition of art as contemplation, chiding even the Dutch Reformed theologian Gerardus Van der Leeuw for losing sight of the animating connection

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between art and life in his *Sacred and Profane Beauty*.\(^81\) The question which immediately presents itself upon reading Wolterstorff’s critique in the context of theological aesthetics is whether Balthasar’s entire aesthetic approach is not in fact deeply reliant on a model of art as contemplation, where the masterpiece (enjoyed, we may assume, in a gallery or concert hall) which occasions vision and rapture exerts its autonomy and evidential power precisely to the attentive individual subject, drawn into *contemplatio* by beauty and truth. If this is indeed Balthasar’s governing aesthetic model, which he then employs as an analogue and gateway to the vision and rapture which attend “seeing the form” of God Incarnate, we may well have occasion to wonder again whether his *theologia gloriae* is out of step with the reality of art in the contemporary context. Wolterstorff’s work demands that both philosophers of art and theologians turn their attention from the narrow confines of the Western canon of art and music to understand art, music, literature, and all forms of creativity in global and panhistorical perspective. Balthasar’s work, on the other hand, is deeply steeped in the European tradition and largely oriented towards the highest echelons of the Western canon. We may well wonder, as does George Pattison, whether Balthasar’s guiding framework, where “cultural forms” are “understood as mediating ‘Beauty’” is in fact able to account for Eastern art, for example, which is built on entirely different “metaphysical and linguistic assumptions.”\(^82\) The frequently-employed epithet, spoken

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\(^{82}\) Pattison, 111.
by Henri de Lubac, that Balthasar was “perhaps the most cultured man of our time” may thus perhaps appear to be a negative, rather than beneficial, aspect of his legacy.\textsuperscript{83} Taken a certain way, Balthasar’s theological aesthetics seem to yield a “top-down” approach in the most negative, hegemonic sense. To be sure, Wolterstorff even in his article refrains from criticizing Balthasar directly. But the question of whether Balthasar has also been bewitched by the Grand Modern Narrative of Beauty in Wolterstorff’s estimation is an open question.

Wolterstorff’s attempt to go “beyond beauty and the aesthetic” in considering art theologically is also consistent with a stream of Reformed thought which aims to situate art and artmaking as a “creatural” vocation anchored in the call of creation rather than in terms of transcendental beauty, truth, and goodness. For such thinkers, typified by figures such as Calvin Seerveld, “exaltation of the invisible perfection of (real) Beauty” such as one finds in a thinker like Balthasar “has indeed long handicapped a sound grasp of the place and task of human artistry” which ought rather to be understood in terms of the sensory world, “ludic” (i.e., playful) discovery, and (perhaps most importantly for Wolterstorff) the “lived world.”\textsuperscript{84} In such a view, Balthasar’s emphasis on the


transcendentals, paired with his supposed classicism, may signal his irrelevance for contemporary discussions surrounding Christian faith and the arts.

**Balthasar and the Contemporary Situation**

These are all legitimate concerns. However, as what is to follow will demonstrate, these areas of consideration do not once and for all drive a nail through Balthasar’s legacy for theology and the arts but rather force contemporary theological aestheticians to probe more deeply the substance of his thought. It is my contention that rather than simply reinforcing a Eurocentric, Neoplatonist, or even triumphalist vision of aesthetics or theology, Balthasar’s trilogy taken as a whole amounts to a kind of deconstruction and simultaneous re-envisioning of the philosophical tradition which engendered the “institution of high art” in the first place. For Balthasar aesthetic contemplation is indeed disinterested in the sense that it requires a kind of suspension of personal interest, in the form of *Gelassenheit* or “letting-go” (with all its mystical-religious implications). Yet such a posture can never be divorced from action, as the titular statue in Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo” seems to intone: “You must change your life.” Any attempt to see Balthasar’s view of art as elitist, overly abstract, or severed from life and society fails to grasp the deeply *integrative* impulse at work in his theology. Balthasar sought not just to erect a grand theological edifice under the banner of glory but to situate individual and communal experience and action within the aesthetic pattern of
call and response—the call (kaleo) of the beautiful (kalon), as Bruce Benson points out, which leads necessarily to the good and the true as lived out in history. For Balthasar, art and creativity are a response to the divine, and art history, like the history of philosophy and theology, thus becomes “the history of a continual, subterranean decision”—whether or not to open up (Balthasar calls this an “apocalypse”) to God.86

Neither, then, can Balthasar’s aesthetics be dismissed for making a “direct appeal” to glory, as Dyrness seems to suggest. The link Balthasar makes between art, glory, and metaphysics is analogical and sacramental in character; he does not simply equate “inner-worldly beauty” with divine glory. Beauty “encapsulates” both divine and earthly beauty without making them identical or, particularly dangerously in a postmodern context, dissociating them completely in the “equivocity of sheer dialectic.”87 Beauty is thus a word which cries out to be understood analogically in Balthasar’s thought, not in a univocal or unambiguous sense. Moreover, rather than bypassing sin, cross, and the descent to the dead, Balthasar explores these horrors in aesthetic terms as pushing

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analogical (and trinitarian) language to the very limit. Balthasar is both a theologian of
glory and a theologian of the cross, in Luther’s typology—the cross itself paradoxically
displays "glory as kenosis," not God hidden sub contrario but shining forth love from the
darkness of Ungestalt or formlessness.

Balthasar and Enchantment

One potentially fruitful theme in contemporary theological aesthetics which deserves
particular treatment as it resonates deeply with Balthasar’s project is the conversation
surrounding the term “enchantment.” This is the idea that art, creativity, and poetics
help correct the process of “disenchantment” (Entzauberung) characteristic of modern
industrial societies, as described by sociologist Max Weber.\(^8\) In the face of
instrumentalizing reason and technologization, art helps focus our attention on the
sacramentality of the world and the attitude of wonder and reverence (rather than a
desire to control and subjugate) we ought to cultivate within it.\(^9\) Here the etymological
chain of influence runs back to art theorist Suzi Gablik, who proposed re-enchantment
through art as a way of bringing to the fore ecological, social, and non-patriarchal
priorities as a rejoinder to Weber’s seemingly inevitable diagnosis of capitalist

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societies. The language of enchantment pervades the recent writings of Anglican theologian David Brown on the sacramentality of place, as well as providing the starting-off point for an interesting collection of essays generated by a rare but significant meeting of art theorists and theologians in Chicago sponsored by James Elkins and visual studies theorist David Morgan in 2009.

Balthasar’s theology intersects this theme; as he memorably puts it, “when nature is deprived of divinity, the presence of the Creator within it fades. To the observer who sees matters only in terms of the useful, God disappears into the background.” As we shall see in relation to Balthasar, the power of beauty to enchant—and to draw the lover toward God—is of primary importance. In a society or an era in which, as Balthasar famously observed, beauty has been lifted away “like a mask,” there is a desperate need for beauty, wonder, and love. Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, particularly in the way it unfolds in the famous first pages of *Herrlichkeit*, is a “re-enchantment” of Christian theology that has lost its way in modernity.

Exceptionally pertinent to this discussion is thus Jeffrey Kosky’s recent work on enchantment and disenchantment in relation to wonder. With both theological-
philosophical acumen and art-historical knowledge, Kosky profiles a number of artists “disenchanted with modern disenchantment” who seek “the darkness in which they might find the light”: Walter De Maria, Andy Goldsworthy, James Turrell, and Diller + Scofidio. Kosky has also recently written about Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (the canonical work of Land Art) and the wonder it evokes when experienced in person. Kosky’s writing is deeply influenced by Heidegger, with much talk of “clearing,” coming-to-light, and the protection (what Heidegger often calls shepherding or sheltering) of things in the light of Being, and so his approach is perhaps the closest to Balthasar’s “Heideggerian Thomism.” In his chapter on the light-based art of James Turrell, Kosky summons Balthasar’s reading of the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius to speak of “the manifestation of the unmanifest.” In Turrell’s light sculptures, “the vision of the divine directs us toward the invisible aura or presence of visible things by setting us on a path through and beyond manifest images and objects to their unmanifest source or origin.” Kosky thus models a type of “theology of art” which does effectively draw from both contemporary art and theory, philosophy, and theology – the type of practice for which the present study is meant to serve as a resource.

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95 Kosky, *Arts of Wonder*, 105.

96 Ibid., 106.
The language of origins prefigures an important theme in this dissertation—namely, the “origin of the work of art,” in Heidegger’s famous phrase. Balthasar’s aesthetics do not just look to the surface of the artwork, nor to its social or political context, but to the ultimate horizon of Being. As such, they go beyond the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic to a more fundamental source or origin—a theological, not just ontico-ontological, vista.

**Conclusion**

Finding a place for Balthasar’s theological aesthetics in the landscape of theology and the arts is complex. However, as our brief survey of the current state of the field implies, and as the rest of this dissertation will strive to point out, there are already some important points of contact beyond what Viladesau and Dyrness have pointed out. The experience of wonder remains of critical importance. Balthasar’s criticism of Heidegger is precisely that his thought, predicated on the ontological difference between Beings and being, cannot sustain its own emphasis on wonder (specifically the wonder occasioned by the question “why is there something rather than nothing?”). Rather, for Balthasar authentic wonder (in the form of admiratio) is made possible by the theological difference between God and creatures, which ultimately we experience in the all-encompassing ambit of the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being. The ever-greater dissimilarity between the divine Other and human forms is the basis for theological aesthetics. Secondly, aesthetics must be attuned to beauty, which awakens desire, as
that which moves our souls towards the divine. A Balthasarian theology of art must begin with the analogy of being—with wonder, desire, and imagination which lead beyond earthly forms to their ultimate source—lest it lose sight of divine glory in the pursuit of earthly beauty. With this in mind, we can move to examine Balthasar’s central motif in *Herrlichkeit*—the masterpiece.
II: Miracle

This chapter investigates Balthasar’s phenomenology of art by starting at the most natural point of entry to his theological aesthetics—the unique, even “miraculous” status he accords the great work of art and which serves as the central metaphor for his aesthetic christology. This leads to consideration of Balthasar’s “phenomenological” method for theology, particularly as it plays out in the relationship between subjective and objective evidence, and its implications for a theology of art. Balthasar refuses to sunder the link between the appearance of the “form” and the appropriation of this form by the subject. Accordingly, the chapter closes by considering the relationship between beauty and ethics—for Balthasar resists an autonomous model of art-as-contemplation divorced from action, instead framing beauty’s “call” in ethical terms.

Where there is Beauty, there must also be Truth and Goodness.

The Uniqueness of the Work of Art

According to a lecture he gave later in life, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s doctoral studies in German art and literature (Germanistik) were plagued by a nagging question: “There are many good works of literature, music and art, and of other spiritual or human activities. How can we recognize a masterwork that, though belonging to a particular category, transcends it and becomes unique?”¹ It is an intriguing question, and one that would

eventually serve as a spur to his entire theological project, which centers on the “uniqueness” of Christ—the supreme ‘masterpiece,’ the perfect art of God—amongst all earthly “forms.” Unlike Karl Rahner or Paul Tillich, who sought ways in which to correlate human cultural experience (including the variegated forms of art, music and literature) to divine revelation, Balthasar’s starting point is not the “religious sense that subjectively exists in every person”—the domain of the “philosophy of religion”—but the irreducible singularity of the Christ, He Who is Unique in all cosmic history.² For Balthasar, this is thus “how the transition from the arts to theology happens”; not beginning from general human experience of the transcendent, but outwards from the ‘fascinating’ figure of Christ. “Theological aesthetics” consists of seeing the glorious “form” of God incarnate (vision) and being enraptured or transported (rapture) by its radiance.

It is certainly clear from Balthasar’s writings he was well aware of the power of artistic “form” to move and transform, and his theology is full of examples of great artworks—symphonies, poems, novels, paintings, plays—which lay hold of the subject with a “self-explanatory,” transformative power.³ Such works, for Balthasar, emerge from their historical and aesthetic contexts not just as a product of their times, but as something truly new and unexpected, a genuine irruption of beauty and meaning which enraptures

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² Ibid., 64.
those who encounter it: “A great work of art appears like an original creation, an inexplicable miracle on the stage of history.”⁴ (Heidegger expresses a similar sentiment: “Whenever [great] art happens—that is, when there is a beginning—a push enters history, and history either starts up or starts again.”⁵) Elsewhere Balthasar terms the emergence of the work of art a “spontaneous eruption.”⁶

Like his contemporary Karl Barth, Balthasar frequently uses as an example of such transcendent singularity the symphonies of Mozart, music which in its interior rightness, wholeness, and self-evident beauty cannot be explained simply in terms of scientific, historical, or sonic analysis. Rather, works such as The Magic Flute demand to be experienced on their own terms, not dissected into its component pieces. When listening to one of Mozart’s symphonies, one experiences the impression of “complete inevitability with perfect freedom, overwhelming the beholder, and making him say: it could only have been thus.”⁷ Neither derivative nor programmatic, Mozart’s music goes beyond what came before it and surpasses all imitations. In its supreme beauty, perhaps—as Karl Barth suggested—Mozart’s music even surpasses the cultural sphere and “belongs” to theology. Balthasar makes similar claims in regards to the poetry of Claudel and Rilke, the novels of Bernanos, the paintings of Rouault and Michelangelo, and the

⁴ Ibid., 116.
⁶ See Oakes, 26.
plays of Shakespeare and Calderon—these are masterpieces, emerging from history with a kind of world-opening power, perhaps verging on the boundaries of the holy. As in David Tracy’s concept of the “classic,” their meanings and layers of beauty are inexhaustible, ever yielding new truth through the ages. Emerging as they do at particular points in history, they are evidence—perhaps better evidence than philosophy—of the unfolding history of Being.

It is perhaps intriguing, considering the visual, eidetic paradigm which undergirds much of *The Glory of the Lord*, to consider the fact that Balthasar’s first foray into theological aesthetics was an investigation of the revelatory aesthetics of music. It is also one of the first places in which he develops his Goethean theory of form (*Gestalt*): “Melody ... contains a certain aura which binds the notes together into a unity, lending them an entirely new character. ... In it the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. These structures are called *Gestalten*. They cannot be logically comprehended, but are directly evident and meaningful.”

Here already are major themes of Balthasar’s theology of form in the theological aesthetics—the indissolubility of artistic form; its inner necessity and self-evident quality; and the notion of the whole in the fragment (*das Ganze im Fragment*). Form can

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also not be studied in isolation, but in its interpenetration and interweaving with other forms, as music makes (implicitly) explicit. Harmony, melody, and counterpoint coalesce in the musical work, manifesting an “evidential rightness” that is integrative and dynamic. Balthasar takes up this same imagery when he suggests in a book of the same name that “truth is symphonic.”

Music is also “wordless” or un-worded (unworthaft), which makes it an interesting candidate in terms of Balthasar’s “universal language” uttered by the masterpiece. Balthasar especially stresses the immediacy of music, the way it speaks directly to the heart. It thus yields, for the early (and perhaps naïve) Balthasar a close analogy for theology and piety. It should of course also be noted that Balthasar was a formidable musician in his own right. For the listening subject, the appreciation of great works of music—and here we are speaking of Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven—requires attuned faculty, the “ear” of the connoisseur “able to distinguish art from kitsch.” To internalize the wordless words of music involves a kind of subjective ‘hearing the form’—a grasping of the objective standards of the work and being transported by them. Balthasar’s famous twofold schema of vision and rapture which opens the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord* can thus easily be translated into musical terms—music also seizes us,

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inspiring us with longing and moving us toward Beauty. Both sight and sound—the Hellenic and the Hebraic—inspire eros for “beauty itself.”  

For Balthasar, “every worldly being is epiphanic,” a form which uniquely discloses the primal truth, goodness, and beauty of Being. We can thus describe Balthasar’s aesthetics as “revelatory aesthetics,” where the phenomenology of art manifests an openness to not only the power of form but the “depth” contained and expressed in the form, which ultimately opens onto theological horizons.

Towards a Balthasarian Phenomenology of Art

Ed Block sums up what might be termed Balthasar’s explicit phenomenology of art in three points, which he applies to Balthasar’s literary criticism but are equally applicable to his discussions of the arts in general. Block sees these three emphases as an implied critique of Hegelian aesthetics.

First, there is Balthasar’s strong “polemic against the genetic fallacy” in art, the idea that an artwork can be explained by attention to its historical context, authorial/artistic

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12 Benson, Liturgy as a Way of Life, 5.
intent, or other determinant factors. As we have seen, a great painting or symphony is for Balthasar a kind of miracle—an inevitable event of “emergence” and freedom which goes beyond antecedent conditions.

In the experiences of extraordinary beauty—whether in nature or in art—we are able to grasp a phenomenon in its distinctiveness that otherwise remains veiled. What we encounter in such an experience is as overwhelming as a miracle, something we will never get over. And yet it possesses its intelligibility precisely as a miracle: it is something that binds and frees at the same time, since it gives itself unambiguously as the “self manifesting freedom” (Schiller) of inner, undemonstrable necessity.

Second, Block points out Balthasar’s “stress on astonishment as the first moment of aesthetic appreciation.” In the presence of a great artwork, we are overcome with admiratio, an ecstatic movement out of ourselves and into the world opened by the work of art; we are, in a sense, left dumbstruck by its miraculous advent. Wonder is also, of course, a deeply Heideggerian theme. For Balthasar, there is a close analogy between the wonder we have at Being—that there is something instead of nothing—and our wonder at the existence of art. In fact, in an important sense the latter is a manifestation of the former. The “relative singularity” of the artwork—a uniqueness which can only be compared, for Balthasar, with the experience of falling in love or with

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16 The wonder art evokes is a common theme in Western philosophy. Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, in her recent theological aesthetics, terms this astonishment or wonder asombro, a kind of de-centering Peircian “firstness” in our experience with art.
awareness of death—invites astonishment that such a miracle could appear in our midst.  

Thirdly, as Block points out for Balthasar the work of art has an inexplicable inner necessity—it forms its own (visual, verbal, musical, etc.) vocabulary. “The work of art itself corresponds in strictest fashion to the ‘law of individuality,’” which is a “law” in the sense that it cannot be compromised or dissolved. Perfectly free in its conception and creation and yet possessed of a complete inevitability as it takes on its final form, displaying an “interior rightness and evidential power”—these are the hallmarks of the true masterpiece, of the “original” work of art which demands our attention: “A great work of art is not built from already coined words but creates from the imprinted language new, never-heard words which, when uttered, explain themselves to those who have eyes and ears for it.” In other words, the work of art is self-interpreting and “self-explanatory,” disclosing a new language. Balthasar cites Shakespeare and Goethe as examples of the way the “unique utterance” of the artwork soon becomes in its outward spread into culture a “universal language,” so that we can speak of the age of Shakespeare as if it were always so even though Shakespeare’s historical advent was purely contingent. Rather than drawing on a ready-made language, “the unique word...
makes itself comprehensible through its own self: and the greater a work of art, the more extensive the cultural sphere it dominates will be."²¹

Block also thus reminds us that Balthasar stresses “objective standards of appreciation over the subjective readiness of the viewer/reader to ‘get’ the work.”²² As in both Kant and Aquinas, the work of art itself “measures” (adequatio) the viewing subject rather than the other way around. This points to the hermeneutical implications of Balthasar’s model of art. As with any “ineluctable miracle”²³ or divine appearance, the great work of art presents itself to all with a kind of undeniable universality. Yet for Balthasar, art “discloses itself more profoundly and more truly to an individual the more attuned and practiced are his powers of perception.”²⁴ In other words, in order to be able to be open to the disclosive power of the aesthetic event one needs to cultivate “the eye of the connoisseur which can infallibly distinguish art from kitsch.”²⁵ This is, however, not just a matter of subjective taste—rather, for Balthasar “the objective and radiant rightness” of the artistic form itself is what enables its perception and interpretation.²⁶ It is important to remember here that Balthasar’s primary subject is theological, not just aesthetic. Yet the two are so closely intertwined in this case it seems evident he uses the same language to describe both. Rather than an elitism, Balthasar is attempting to ²¹ Quoted in Edward T. Oakes, “Eyes of Faith: an apologetic of beauty,” The Christian Century (June 26, 2007), 27.
²² Block, 209.
²⁴ Ibid., 116.
²⁵ GL1, 481.
²⁶ Ibid.
express the wondrous power of the image to reveal itself to any subject willing to be open to its unveiling.

To sum up, Block suggests the work of art for Balthasar is a miraculous event which emerges from ontological wonder, unfolding its riches to the subject with a singular, objective potency. This is, of course, precisely the model Balthasar applies to theology in his theological aesthetics, seeing the event of Christ as the ultimate singularity in history. Balthasar begins on the “phenomenological plane” of “relative singularities (death, falling in love, and masterworks of art)” precisely as a means to the end of understanding Christ as “absolute singularity.” There are precedents, to be sure, in the “language” of metaphysics and culture; yet the Christ-form, like the miraculous work of art, breaks into the world with a unique, radiant power—a new universal language. Balthasar thus speaks, in phenomenological language, of an “eidetic reduction” in “seeing the form” of Christ. The historical-critical method breaks apart the Scriptures, looking for antecedent causes much in the same way that one searches Jacobean dramaturgy for clues to Shakespeare’s greatness or combs Mozart’s musical influences in order to dissect his genius. Yet Christ, like King Lear or The Magic Flute, is genuinely new and self-exegeting. Karl Barth, in his essay on Mozart, makes much the same point. The work of art cannot be explained away by better understanding the process


28 “Just as happened in Old and New Testament scholarship, extensive efforts have been made of late to analyze Mozart’s entire output from the perspective of the
of its composition or a better awareness of how it came to be. Similarly, the Christ-form must be seen in its enchanting, radiant splendour, not dissected; i.e., it interprets or exeges itself, precisely as the perfect exegenomai of the Father (Jn. 1:18). [Importantly, the Holy Spirit also serves as Ausleger or expositor of the truth.] To “see the form,” to behold the glory of He Who Is Unique, involves suspending historical-critical or evolutionary inquiry in favour of experience of the image (eidos) or form (Gestalt).²⁹ Like Tamino in Mozart’s The Magic Flute, seeing the image of the beloved leads one to exclaim, “Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön” [“This image is enchantingly beautiful.”] The image leads to its prototype. Theological aesthetics proceeds by seeing Christ as the true masterpiece, the object of love and desire, the epicenter of primal wonder, and the locus of self-authenticating Beauty.

**Beauty**

Here a caveat is necessary. For Balthasar, there are many works of art and music which seem to “technically achieve the transcendence from beauty to glory,” purporting to

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²⁹ This corresponds to the “iconic turn” in art criticism linked with Elkins and Didi-Huberman. See discussion in chapter 1.

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many impulses he received and assimilated in his earlier and later years: from the sons of Bach and, later, from Bach himself, from Handel and Gluck, from Joseph and Michael Haydn, but also from various German, Italian, and French composers now scarcely remembered. Was he perhaps unique in that he did not at all want to be an innovator, a revolutionary, or someone special? Is it possible that he could and wished to live and compose only out of the musical currents of his time and then, to be sure, in so doing translate his own unmistakable genius into music that he could be, and wished to be, only a pupil, but as such “incomparable” and an absolute master?” Karl Barth, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Zollikon : Evangelischer Verlag, 1956) English version trans. Clarence K. Pott (Grand Rapids, MI : Eerdmans, 1986), 28.
lead those who perceive their splendor formae to the magnificence of heaven on earth. Yet ultimately the power of many of these masterpieces to “enchant” must be seen as a warning sign; their pretensions to glory are all too often idolatrous, leading us to domesticate the divine glory in finitude and settle for a counterfeit, worldly ‘revelation’ which originates in man’s artistry rather than God’s. To allow an “inner-worldly theory of beauty” to dictate our understanding of revelation is to cause a “theological aesthetics” to “deteriorate” into an “aesthetic theology”; such a theology, be it romantic or postmodern, is guilty of “betraying and selling out theological substance” in the service of earthly categories. Following Kierkegaard, Balthasar opposes such aestheticism as an idolatrous obstacle to true knowledge of God’s glory.

Balthasar thus asks, perceptively, “Can such a thing really exist as ‘Christian art’?” Such a question cuts to the core of the troubled relationship between earthly aesthetics and an “aesthetic” proper to divine revelation: “Earthly beauty always appears limited in a finite being or through harmonious coordination of finite entities, while God ... shines in other, all-transcending and all-pervading indivisible glory.”

Man cannot “incarcerate” the all-transcending divine glory in a finite form. For this reason, Balthasar is somewhat sympathetic towards historical iconoclasm—there is an

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30 GL1, 206.
31 Ibid., 79-83.
32 Ibid., 205.
33 Ibid., 203.
34 Ibid., 204.
important sense in which biblical religion has, following the second commandment, “rightly forbidden pictorial representations” of God. This applies to secular art but especially to sacred or ecclesial art, including even some of the historical excesses of Byzantine iconography: as Balthasar remarks in a famous passage of Herrlichkeit, “we cannot say that the theological arguments proposed in favour of icons always sound very convincing.”35 (Here he echoes John Calvin, who notes in the Institutes that the biblical arguments of the iconophiles are so hermeneutically suspect “that it is painful even to quote them.”36) By the same token, Balthasar’s whole project of “theological aesthetics” cannot be seen as simply a stimulus to include better, more ornate art in churches—as if beautifying sanctuaries (or the liturgy itself) with “statues and paintings” would suffice to summon the immeasurable glory of God.37 Balthasar recognizes that there are many works of art—he lists Bach, Mozart, Rouault and Messiaen as examples—where there is an “authentic and pious transparency” to the divine glory.38 (As Karl Barth recognized, there is a sense in which Mozart belongs to theology!) But on the whole, as Balthasar notes elsewhere, the great age of the intertwining of “human art and Christian revelation” (the age of icons and basilicas) is over, and perhaps this is a blessing in disguise; we are now able to realize the great dissimilarity between earthly

35 Ibid., 40.
(especially artistic) beauty and glory which surpasses and relativizes any aesthetic similarities we can find (and overdraw) between the two.\textsuperscript{39}

How then, are we to speak of glory? It is undeniable that the relationship between glory and beauty draws closer when one moves beyond earthly (or, in Balthasar’s terminology, “inner-worldly”) beauty to “transcendental beauty.” Here Balthasar is famously drawing on the rich Thomist/classical understanding of the “transcendentals,” universal qualities which all beings possess yet which transcend all individual manifestations: Truth, Goodness, Oneness, and finally (and not without controversy) Beauty. It is not clear whether Aquinas himself considered Beauty a transcendental.\textsuperscript{40} However, the ontological naming of Beauty extends back to one of Aquinas’ primary sources, Pseudo-Dionysius, even as it reaches through the Neoplatonic tradition to the Greeks, and Aquinas certainly constitutes the ultimate origin and end of beauty theologically: as Pseudo-Dionysius writes, \textit{ex divina pulchritudine esse omnia derivatur} [the divine beauty is that from which all being is derived].\textsuperscript{41} As Armand Maurer succinctly explains, in such an understanding “Beauty is a transcendental mode of Being, accompanying being wherever it is found, so that every being is beautiful insofar as it

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\textsuperscript{39} \textit{GL1}, 37.

\textsuperscript{40} For a more polemical discussion of this, see Umberto Eco, \textit{Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages} (New Haven: Yale University, 2002); Jan Aertsen, \textit{Medieval Philosophy and the Case of the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas} (London: E.J. Brill, 1996).

\textsuperscript{41} Quoted in Brendan Thomas Sammon, \textit{The God Who is Beauty: Beauty as a divine name in Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Areopagite} (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 309.
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exists.”42 In other words, beauty transcends all its particular instantiations, even as it is found in all things by virtue of their essential participation in Being. For Balthasar, like Maurer, Beauty is not only to be ranked with the transcendental but is the aspect of Being which gracefully “dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good.”43 In a similar vein, Jacques Maritain—acting as Aquinas’ interpreter for the modern age—innovatively suggests Beauty is not only a transcendental but is precisely the sum of the other transcendental taken together. Following Aquinas more closely, Beauty is defined as id quod visum placet, “that which, being seen, pleases,” which consists of three major characteristics when applied to the perceptible realm.44 Firstly, beauty means integrity (integritas), a certain pleasing “fullness” intelligible to the subject; secondly, proportion (proportio or consonantia), ordered relationships within the object, which again “delight” the viewing subject; and finally, radiance (claritas), the “splendor of the form” which emanates from Things, revealing something of their secret interiority.45 Each of these aspects of the beautiful, though dependent on cognition and the activity of reason, resist a purely scientific, Cartesian “knowing” of Things by analyzing their accidental qualities, but instead call for

42 Armand A. Maurer, About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983), 34. As Jacques Maritain writes, the transcendental “transcend or go beyond every genus or category, because they permeate or imbue everything, and are present in any thing whatever.” Jacques Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry (Cleveland/New York: World Publishing Co., 1954), 124.

43 GL1, 18.

44 Maritain, Creative Intuition, 122.

an approach which recognizes *splendor formae* as the “radiance of a mystery”\(^{46}\) — namely, the mystery of Being itself. The artist, through the unique “intelligence” of poetic intuition, is able to perceive something of the elemental mystery of the transcendental aspects of Being; the work of art s/he makes manifests the “splendor of form” and invites the viewing subject to also be drawn to Beauty (and ultimately Truth and Goodness).

Balthasar’s greatest contribution to contemporary theology is arguably the way he accords Beauty a place of primacy, considering it along with patristic and medieval tradition as not just an ‘accidental’ quality of individual objects but a transcendental quality of Being. Though the (post)modern world may scoff at beauty as the “ornament of a bourgeois past,”\(^{47}\) for Balthasar Beauty, like Truth, Goodness, and Oneness, is a quality in which all created things participate—a fundamental aspect of ontology.

Balthasar’s project is precisely one that sets out with Beauty as a “first word” in theology, the attempt to reintegrate this lost transcendental (along with Truth and Goodness) into our always-inadequate ‘words about God.’ The Church Fathers “regarded Beauty as a transcendental and did theology accordingly,” with Beauty as both a road to God and a spur to write ‘beautiful’ theology.\(^{48}\) As one of Balthasar’s primary patristic sources, Pseudo-Dionysius (Denys) writes: “Beauty unites all things and

\(^{46}\) Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 123.

\(^{47}\) *GL*1, 18.

\(^{48}\) *GL*1, 39.
is the source of all things. It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty.⁴⁹ Theology thus becomes the tracing out of this radiant beauty in Being. Balthasar sets out to write theology in a similar “style”—theology as eros for the divine glory, a “theological aesthetics” which takes aesthetic contemplation as an analogue and methodology for “seeing the form” of God in Christ. Just as one contemplates nature or a work of art, discerning forms and being transported by their beauty towards transcendent Beauty, so perceiving the unique “form” of Christ as it emerges from salvation-history enraptures and transports us into experience of the glory of the Lord (Herrlichkeit). Beauty is thus rightly said to be a divine Name (as in Pseudo-Dionysius); though “inner-worldly” beauty is limited as a means of describing the nature of glory, there is an analogy to be made between “glory” and “beauty” which, despite all dangers, obtains.

A theological aesthetics is both possible and necessary, though as Balthasar remarks (in relation to the aforementioned problem of Christian art) the subsequent “translation of glory into beauty” remains an “abysmally deep problem.”⁵⁰ Throughout his work Balthasar takes pains to emphasize the absolute uniqueness and otherness of divine glory, the way it surpasses all earthly conceptions of “beauty,” though of course as human beings these are our necessary starting-point:

...when we approach God’s revelation with the category of the beautiful, we quite spontaneously bring this category with us in its this-worldly form. It is only when such a this-worldly aesthetics does not fit revelation’s transcendent form

that we suddenly come to an astonished halt and conscientiously decline to continue on that path.\textsuperscript{51}

There is no seamless conceptual or experiential transition from (this-worldly) beauty to glory, from the diverse beautiful objects which shape our philosophical aesthetics to the \textit{kabod} and \textit{doxa} of the biblical drama. “Glory,” as Gawronski defines it, is “that splendor thrown off at the encounter of God with His world.”\textsuperscript{52} This is a “Beauty” that far exceeds our finite language, perhaps closer to a Kantian sublime than philosophical notions of “beauty.” The emphasis which Balthasar places on the sheer otherness of God’s glory—its “all-transcending” power, the way it surpasses all earthly categories—may come as a surprise given his emphasis on the perceptibility of the aesthetic form. Nevertheless, it is a Barthian (and biblical) theme which Balthasar poses in strong terms even as he upholds the critical importance of a “theological aesthetics.” Balthasar frames the question of glory (\textit{doxa}) in aesthetic terms—particularly the biblical imagery of “light”:

“In your light we see light” (Psalm 36). This same Taboric light underscores the Johannine account of glory: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only.” But again, this is not just earthly beauty but uncreated light, \textit{splendor formae} which thoroughly oversaturates (as in Jean-Luc Marion’s contemporary phenomenology of revelation) and overwhems earthly perception.

\textsuperscript{51} GL1, 37. The new “path” which must be followed is, for Balthasar, the dramatics – for only a theological dramatics centred on the narrative revelation of Christ in history can fully anchor and shape an authentic aesthetics.

The particular dynamics of Balthasar’s treatment of the transcendent “beauty” proper to God’s “glory” is exemplified in his critique of historical Protestant theology from Luther to Gerhard Nebel. For Balthasar, Protestant versions of “theological aesthetics” have so far only explored the relationship between “revelation and this-worldly beauty”; a helpful contribution, to be sure, but ultimately failing to explore the heart of the matter, which presses on beyond exploring this preliminary relationship to interrogating “the beautiful [itself] as a theological category.” Protestant theological aesthetics are wary of introducing a permanent structure into metaphysics whereby beauty could be, through analogy, guaranteed an ontological-theological permanence. Instead, the language of analogy is subsumed into the language of event. Nebel “expressly opposes to the ‘static analogy of being’ what he calls an ‘analogy of event’: the possibility that the true God of grace could, in his freedom, make an appearance within beauty’s genuine quality as event.” Though Nebel is for Balthasar “the best that the Lutheran tradition could produce without denying itself,” Nebel (in typically Protestant fashion) makes beauty into an “event” rather than an enduring, theologically derived “transcendental” (as in the Catholic tradition of the Beautiful, True and Good). And thus though this broken “event of the beautiful” can be seen as an authentic pointer to the “event of Christ” – there may be, as Nebel puts it, “der im Kunstwerk erscheinende Gott

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53 GL1, 56-57.
54 GL1, 58.
— beauty remains firmly on the side of the “created” rather than that of the Creator.56

In this event, the decision has been implicitly been taken that beauty is not a ‘transcendental’ like oneness, truth, and goodness, or, what amounts to the same thing, that beauty need not be predicated of God in its proper sense. But if beauty is conceived of transcendentally, then its definition must be derived from God himself... his self-revelation in history and in the Incarnation – must now become for us the very apex and archetype of beauty in the world...57

If beauty is not seen in its full ontological significance—as a transcendental, not a “predicated” aspect of Being, and moreover finding its “apex” in the disclosure of God in history—then its full significance for theology is dulled. Though Nebel sees the importance of being broken open (Riss) to the divine through the “significant, vulnerable, open individuality” [“eine bedeutende, verletzbare, offene Individualität”] of the artwork, the event of the beautiful remains on the plane of the event.58 We cannot move from the eventual disclosure of a particular earthly form to speak of the beauty of God, or the Trinity, or the Incarnation, and so our understanding of divine glory is impoverished.

56 Nichols, The Word Has Been Abroad, 11.
57 GL1, 69.
58 Nebel, 278.
Karl Barth and the Beauty of the Cross

Balthasar’s language of the cross as the “apex and archetype of beauty” (the “apex of God’s glory shining in the world”\(^{59}\)) is a Johannine formulation which summons another, even more significant Protestant contributor to a theological aesthetics—Balthasar’s contemporary, Karl Barth.\(^{60}\) Barth, perhaps unusually for a twentieth-century Protestant, attributes beauty to God, recognizing that divine glory is not just a matter of unsurpassable “power” but ought to also be conceived of biblically as “radiance and light.” Beauty is, for Barth, a concept germane to discussing the “specifically persuasive and convincing element in [God’s] revelation,”\(^{61}\) the “fact” and “force” of “Primal Beauty” which awakens human desire for the Triune God.\(^{62}\)

Nevertheless, for Barth beauty must always remain secondary in conceiving of the divine glory.\(^{63}\) “We speak of God’s beauty only in explanation of His glory. It is, therefore, a subordinate and auxiliary idea which enables us to achieve a specific clarification and emphasis.”\(^{64}\) Taking his stand against the tradition of the quasi-

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60 Balthasar is also of course the most famous Catholic interpreter of Barth, and was hailed by Barth himself as having the greatest insight into his thought. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Köln: J. Hegner, 1951), English version *Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992). See also D. Stephen Long, *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Preoccupation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).


62 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1 The Doctrine of God Part 1: The Knowledge of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 650 as well as Balthasar, GL1, 54.

63 GL1, 53.

64 Barth, *CD II/1*, 653.
Neoplatonic account of beauty from which Balthasar stands downstream (from Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius through Thomas Aquinas), Barth opposes the idea of a transcendental Beauty participated in things. \(^{65}\) “The Bible neither requires nor permits us, because God is beautiful, to expound the beauty of God as the ultimate cause producing and moving all things.”\(^{66}\) Beauty is an attribute of God, linked with glory, but it is not pre-eminent among his eternal characteristics. Accordingly, for Barth beauty can never be a “leading concept” (or, by extension, a “first word”!) in theology, lest beauty become an “idol.”\(^{67}\)

However, beauty still plays an important role in Barth’s theology. Above all he brings attention to the otherworldly ‘beauty’ of the cross; para-doxically, the glorious splendour of God “radiates from the Crucified.”\(^{68}\) However, even here Barth recognizes the danger of the word “beauty,” which might cause one to lose sight of the supreme ugliness of the salvific event: “In this self-revelation, God’s beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we call ‘ugly’ as well as what we call ‘beautiful’.”\(^{69}\)

The cross is a “form,” it is true, but when it comes to perceiving the splendour of this form its beauty is not “self-evident”; it does not make ‘aesthetic’ sense in light of worldly conceptions of what is beautiful. We, thus, cannot know that the “beauty of

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\(^{65}\) Viladesau, 29.
\(^{66}\) Quoted in Ibid.
\(^{67}\) Ibid., 28.
\(^{68}\) Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, 10.
\(^{69}\) Quoted in GL1, 56.
God shines especially” in the horror of the cross “of ourselves,” by our own perception. Rather, such vision “can only be given to us,” by grace.\(^{70}\) For this reason Barth pleads with Christian artists not to try to capture the beauty of Christ crucified in their paintings.\(^{71}\)

We can see here theo-aesthetic themes and categories that Balthasar will take up and reinterpret through a Catholic doctrine of Being—a theology which is willing to take Beauty as a “leading concept” despite the seemingly irreconcilable fact that the divine glory shines into the world precisely at the point of history’s greatest ugliness and \textit{Angst} (the cross). By the grace of God, we are given the “eyes of faith” so that we can see “the form” of revelation within the drama of divine-human encounter—the glory of God on display in Christ crucified. In the Easter Triduum, “God’s splendor ... reveals and authenticates itself precisely in its own apparent antithesis,” in the dark night of Christ’s crucifixion, entombment and descent to the dead.\(^{72}\) “Our task ... [is] to discover in [Christ’s] deformity [\textit{Ungestalt}] the mystery of transcendental form [\textit{Ubergestalt}].”\(^{73}\)

This is the Christological, theodramatic context for Balthasar’s famous comment that “we ought never to speak of God’s beauty without reference to the form and manner of

\(^{71}\) “No human art should try to represent – in their unity – the suffering God and triumphant man, the beauty of God which is the beauty of Jesus Christ.” Barth, \textit{CD II/1}, 666.  
\(^{72}\) Viladesau, \textit{Theological Aesthetics}, 33.  
\(^{73}\) \textit{GL1}, 460.
appearing which he exhibits in salvation-history." A theological aesthetics does not bypass the cross (including the terrible “hiatus” of Holy Saturday) in order to seek unmediated experience of the divine. Rather, the “drama” of divine-human intersection which culminates in the life, death and resurrection of Christ—the “unique dramatic action” at the center of the theo-drama—has in itself aesthetic dimensions which radiate outwards to our (graced) perception. This “aesthetic dimension” of theodramatic action is “the proper object of a theological aesthetics,” one that includes both the heights and the depths of reality without rendering the “abyssal ugliness of sin and hell” superficial. (Such would be a “Platonic theory of beauty,” a position which in the second volume of Herrlichkeit Balthasar attributes, at least in part, to Augustine—we could also predicate such a view of Schopenhauer.) Theological aesthetics “enables us to perceive the drama of the Cross and the descensus and the Resurrection as the revelation of the divine glory,” the ultimate paradox (from doxa, glory) at the heart of divine revelation.

**Balthasar as Phenomenologist**

We have been speaking in this chapter about Balthasar’s phenomenology of art. It is a central assertion of the present work that recovering Balthasar’s contribution to a nascent theology of art means appreciating Balthasar not only as a confessional

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74 GL1, 124.
75 GL1, 43.
76 Ibid.
77 John Riches, quoted in Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 34.
theologian, but as a philosopher whose insights—articulated in the complementary languages of theology, philosophy, and poetics—remain applicable to the postmodern situation. Pascal Ide has noted that though Balthasar’s opus philisophicum is small in comparison to his theology, there are in the theologian’s work suggestive "intuitions" of a rich, original philosophy based on the (Heideggerian) concept of opening and the (Thomist) notion of “form” (figure)—particularly in the first volume of the Theologik. What emerges out of Balthasar’s quest to “probe the possibility of there being a genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world” is what might be termed a theologically-inflected philosophy of beauty, truth, and Being - a “Heideggerian Thomist” synthesis which opens up new vistas for not only theological aesthetics but the philosophy of art.

As we have seen, Viladesau’s concern was to outline a more expressly “phenomenological” approach to the question of the relationship between theology and art. Ironically, however, it is precisely a phenomenological approach that Balthasar employs, often explicitly, not only throughout his theological aesthetics but into the


79 GL1, 30.
Theo-Drama and Theo-Logic as well. It is, in fact, the reason he begins with beauty, rather than truth, in his great trilogy. One can only arrive at truth, in terms of revelation, by beginning with the appearance of the beautiful—for our “quasi-erotic” response of rapture leads us towards “action” (drama), which in turn allows us to see “how theology is thereby true.”

Drawing on the Thomistic model of the conversio ad phantasmata, Balthasar accords a high place to the senses as the place where knowledge of the world originates – to try to conceive of objects as they “really are” independent of our perception of them is fruitless. Theological beauty, goodness, and truth are accessible to human beings as subjects not because they can be theorized, but because they can be experienced.

Balthasar and Kant

The figure of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is thus an important one in considering Balthasar, as he provides a kind of bridge between classical and modern metaphysics. One may legitimately wonder whether Kant is unjustly blamed for what Balthasar terms a “partial aesthetics.” The case can certainly be made that Kant drives a wedge between the beautiful and the good, seeing their conflation as a “vicious confusion of words.”

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81 Ibid., 212.
For Kant, to call something beautiful is to deal with its representation—its appearance to the senses—rather than its relative usefulness or purpose, still less its connection to an overarching transcendental named Beauty. For this reason Kant’s thought is characterized (by Heidegger and others) as paving the way for phenomenology; in a certain respect the judgment of taste is not only indifferent to beauty in the abstract but “indifferent as to the existence of an object.” Beauty is precisely (and rightly) characterized by Kant as a matter of taste—in particular, as designating that which “is represented as the Object of a universal delight” so far as this is possible in encountering its final appearance. Beauty is thus in an important sense subjective, a name given by the disinterested subject. However, as Balthasar realizes, Kant also suggests that rather than being a hopelessly private concept, beauty is universal:

> For where any one is conscious that his delight in an object is with him independent of interest, it is inevitable that he should look on the object as one containing a ground of delight for all men. ... Accordingly he will speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a quality of the object and the judgement logical ... although it is only aesthetic, and contains merely a reference of the representation of the object to the subject.

Unlike the concepts furnished by reason, aesthetic taste universalizes itself—a “subjective universality” which relies simultaneously on disinterestedness and “a claim to validity for all men.” We make this claim—we “believe ourselves to be speaking

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid. §5
85 Ibid., 211.
86 Kant, §7.
with a universal voice”\(^{87}\) about beauty—not because we can discern or cognize the nature of the aesthetic object in itself \((\text{in Sich})\) but because beauty demands it. It is the “bare form of finality in the representation whereby an object is given to us” which leads us to affirm it as a source of delight as well as “universally communicable.”\(^{88}\)

Balthasar thus describes Kant’s “misleadingly” named “disinterestedness of beauty” as encompassing both the evidence that the depths appeared “to me” as the subject and the striving after the “being-in-itself” of an object. “The quality of ‘being-in-itself’ which belongs to the beautiful, the demand the beautiful itself makes to be allowed to be what it is, the demand, therefore, that we renounce our attempts to control and manipulate it”—these are, for Balthasar, aspects of disinterestedness vital to “seeing the form.”\(^{89}\) Kant also distinguishes between two forms of beauty, the *pulchritudo vaga* or free beauty (which has no “end”) and *pulchritudo adhaerans* which is dependent on its particular form. The finality of the object—what it is supposed to be—is what gives it its beauty. This does not instrumentalize the object—making its more immediate “end” absolute—but rather links the “end” of the beautiful object to our consciousness of it. Aesthetic knowledge discerns beauty in things in relation to the “empirical criterion” of taste as developed over the centuries.\(^{90}\)

\(^{87}\) Kant §8.

\(^{88}\) Kant, §11.

\(^{89}\) *GL*, 153.

\(^{90}\) Kant, 230.
Kant’s understanding of the universal communicability of the beautiful thus provides a bridge to Balthasar’s “universal language” furnished by the work of art. The artwork, as exemplar of the beautiful, commends itself to the senses as pure appearance— as form. Kant, however, in his pursuit of a robust metaphysics—what he calls, in a term pervasive through Balthasar’s work, a “doctrine” of Being—is willing to bracket out Being until he has formulated his whole system. Reason, judgment, and desire must be disentangled and subjected to their own individual critiques before a metaphysics can be (re)constructed. Balthasar, however, follows Heidegger in positing phenomenology as a science of Being which cannot let go of ontology even as it turns to the subject. For Balthasar, then, Kant and Hegel equally yield a model of Being “pre-constructed by reason,” which though it may contain truth, beauty, and goodness has no openness to “transcendental beauty,” still less the “ever more alien” prospect of “transcendental glory.”91

Balthasar’s critique of Kant is best understood in light of his overall genealogy of metaphysics in the fourth and fifth volumes of Herrlichkeit. Here he outlines two metaphysical paths, equally fraught with danger, which have characterized the Western tradition. The first is the “classical mediation” or “cosmological” approach, both in antiquity and in a revived form in the Renaissance. It is out of this tradition that Heidegger and Goethe speak. The benefits of this approach are, as we shall see, a recovery of wonder at Being. For Balthasar, however, this school (if one can speak of a

91 GL5, 13.
clearly defined school in such broad strokes) ultimately fails to grasp the nature of the ontological difference and ends up exalting Being as “self-subsistent.”\(^92\) The more modern, “anthropocentric” approach, on the other hand, loses sight of Being in its turn to the subject—a “Promethean” move where individual and Being (understood in terms of “Absolute Mind”) become coterminous. This identitarian metaphysics Balthasar traces back to Kant—thus though Kant set out to set aside comprehensive knowledge of metaphysics to “make room for faith,”\(^93\) in the end he gives birth to a self-enclosed model of Being centred on the human with no space for an inbreaking Other—a phenomenology without an openness to Being.\(^94\)

**Balthasar and Twentieth-Century Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is, as Husserl notes in his introduction to *Ideas I*, a term that can be used in both a technical and general sense. In general, phenomenology implies a rooting in experience rather than abstraction—describing things “in their self-showing” or appearance, as given to the senses. A phenomenological “description” is one that “can be seen by anyone who is willing to look in the same direction”—which is to say, it relies on the unfolding of a compelling “picture” (*eidos*) which is self-disclosing and self-interpreting. This is a methodology which Balthasar, with his constant oscillation between the subjective and objective, the depths and the appearance itself, keeps in

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\(^93\) Kant, *Critique of Reason*, xxx.

\(^94\) See Bourgeois, 52-54.
the forefront even when his themes are most “theological” (as opposed to philosophical, though the two obviously cross over at many junctures). When Jean-Luc Marion praises Balthasar for daring to “read phenomenologically” the Christian Scriptures, this is the general sense of the word he has in mind.\(^9^5\) In the technical sense, however, there are important links between Balthasar’s work and the historical tradition of twentieth-century phenomenology beginning (downstream from both Kant and early psychology) with Edmund Husserl, whose “principle of all principles” is precisely that what is “offered to us in ‘intuition’ is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, [and] only within the limits in which it is presented there.”\(^9^6\) Husserl’s “eidetic science” proceeds by a number of reductions meant to make accessible the pure essence (Eidos) of an object. “Seeing an essence” – what Husserl terms “intuition”—is, however, far from scientific in the traditional sense. Instead, ideation can draw on free variation and “phantasy”—psychological processes where subjectivity, not objectivity, is the goal.\(^9^7\)

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\(^9^5\) The crucial text here is Jean-Luc Marion, “Das “Phänomen Christi,”” in Die Kunst Gottes verstehen: Hans Urs von Balthasars theologische Provokationen, eds. Magnus Striet and Jan-Heiner Tück (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2005), 49-53.

\(^9^6\) Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, vol. 1 General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1982), Section 24, 44.

For Balthasar, Husserlian phenomenology is unsatisfactory. In Balthasar’s reading of Husserl and Kant, “the criterion of truth is no longer situated in Being but only in the ‘clarity and distinctness’ of the idea, which comes to be in the representation of the thing in itself (das Ding in sich).” As shall be shown in the next chapter, Husserl’s phenomenological method is critiqued by Heidegger for not being sufficiently ontological. Balthasar similarly faults the German aesthetic tradition for its obliviousness to Being in its emphasis on the phenomenal: “Nevertheless, the central concept of idealist aesthetics, ‘appearance’ (Erscheinung), is still only the half of itself, as long as it is not explained why that which appears in its form is experience as beauty.” A theory of “values”—aesthetic, ethical—thus appears as an “emergency substitute for Being.” Religion is relegated precisely to this inner, subjective realm. Aesthetics—and here Balthasar lists a number of nineteenth-century German thinkers—helpfully aims to “expose the primal elements of the beautiful.” Yet such post-Idealist aestheticians have not “advanced beyond a pure science of experience, or ‘phenomenology’, of the beautiful” to the primordial depths of Being and Beauty. Thus Balthasar stands in a complicated relationship to the phenomenological tradition in philosophy which begins with Kant, is given a name with Husserl, and continues through Scheler, Merleau-Ponty,

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100 *GL*, 601.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.
Heidegger, and so on all the way down to Ricoeur and Gadamer. As we shall see, Balthasar is himself a phenomenologist of revelation though Balthasar is careful not to adopt phenomenological techniques wholesale.¹⁰³

**Theological Aesthetics as Theological Phenomenology**

In the first volume of *Theo-Logic*, Balthasar outlines his plan to develop “a renewed phenomenology that gazes upon the truth of the world in an original act of beholding.” However, Balthasar, particularly in his later work, is suspicious of the Husserlian *epoche* or “bracketing” of existence in order to open oneself more fully to the thing in itself—the series of phenomenological “reductions” endemic to the history of the discipline. The reasons for this lie in his radical rethinking of Kantian aesthetics. In Balthasar's estimation, by separating the world into the *noumenal* and the *phenomenal*, Kant sundered the vital link between appearances (phenomena) and Being. The Husserlian phenomenologist emphasizes “givenness” rather than trying to get behind phenomenality to an independent, objective structure; the quest for *noumena* is suspended and instead the self-showing of the thing is presumed to be, as it were, the point at which philosophy begins. There are aspects of this approach clearly resonant with Balthasar’s method: “seeing the form” is, in essence, a phenomenological task

¹⁰³ “…Balthasar makes us aware of his sympathy for the phenomenological thinking favoured by many late nineteenth- and early mid-twentieth-century German philosophers from Brentano to Husserl and Heidegger. His phenomenology, we should note, is, however, always in the service of a Christian ontology in the mode of a repristinated Scholasticism and even, ultimately, Thomism - unlike theirs.” Nichols, *Say it is Pentecost*, 4.
whereby the form of revelation is precisely seen in its “self-showing,” a vision which inspires rapture. The first volume of Theo-Logic follows the lead of Husserl’s “first principle” in seeking a phenomenology of truth which “will serve theology best precisely by putting aside any anxious concern to select and present topics in function of subsequent theological exigencies.” It is also consistent with Paul Tillich’s model of a “critical phenomenology” useful for understanding revelation, one that takes mystery as its starting-point rather than Husserl’s “logical” approach which has difficulty finding an appropriate example in the realm of the spiritual.\(^{104}\) Tillich thus writes, for example, following Rudolf Otto, of a phenomenology of the holy, for holiness (even if it is mistakenly read as an “aesthetic-emotional” phenomenon, in Tillich’s view) can be experienced.\(^{105}\) Nevertheless, Balthasar remains critical of phenomenological attempts (including theological approaches, such as that of Gerhardus van der Leeuw) to “make the phenomenon of a ‘unique’ form visible” via the suspension of judgment (the Husserlian *epoche*).\(^{106}\) For Balthasar, “in order to be perceived as what it is, such a form would constantly demand the entrance of its beholder into faith—into a faith that has

\(^{104}\) See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 106-107. For Tillich, “revelation always is a subjective and an objective event in strict interdependence. Someone is grasped by the manifestation of the mystery; this is the subjective side of the event. Something occurs through which the mystery of revelation grasps someone; this is the objective side.” For Tillich, there is no revelation “in general” (*Offenbarung überhaupt*), just revelation to specific groups and individuals who are “gripped” or seized by its appearance.

\(^{105}\) Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 215.

\(^{106}\) *GL1*, 499.
been at least tentatively ‘advanced’ (like money on credit) but a faith that is something different from a ‘methodological participation.’”

One cannot see the form without faith, without the “eyes of faith” illumined by the light which shines out from the unique form. This is not to say that anyone cannot be seized and enchanted by the primal vision of transcendental glory. Yet trying to experience the self-showing of a thing more fully by artificially ‘suspending’ its essence is, for Balthasar, a fruitless task. For Balthasar, only an ontological aesthetic theory—a “comprehensive doctrine of being,” a metaphysics where beauty, truth, and goodness overflow from the inexhaustible resources of Being itself—is adequate for authentic metaphysical inquiry, and therefore is the only adequate basis for a renewed phenomenology—in other words, “a doctrine of Christian perception.” To subscribe to Husserlian phenomenology is to implicitly value the phenomenal at the expense of the noumenal—rightly emphasizing the appearance, but no longer seeing it as a manifestation of the depths of Being. (Here once again, as we shall see, Balthasar follows Heidegger.) For Balthasar, a philosophy of “perception” moves back-and-forth between the self-showing of the object, the experience of it by the knowing subject, and the implicitly theological horizon of Being within which this process unfolds. He thus connects the Husserlian notion that “all philosophy is first and foremost a phenomenology” to a Thomistic, theological understanding of truth as initiation into Being.

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107 Ibid.
A phenomenology of art which remains open not only to the self-showing of the art
object but to the horizon of divine revelation provides a new way of thinking about the
task of theological aesthetics, one which takes up a broadly phenomenological
methodology without sacrificing Balthasar’s emphasis on the importance of Being and
of the radiant shining of glory through art and culture.

Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, as stated previously, begin with Christ as the unique
and definitive disclosure of God. He thus tailors his theological ‘method’ to be
appropriate to its object. Rather than beginning with human nature in general or the
experiential faith-response of the subject—though the latter is, as we shall see,
absolutely critical to his understanding of the shape of revelation—he seeks “objective
evidence,” “the kind of evidence that emerges and sheds its light from the phenomenon
itself, and not the sort of evidence that is recognized in the process of satisfying the
subject’s needs.” 109 Seeking a “prior understanding” of God in the human psyche is, in a
certain sense, as impossible as Balthasar’s original quest for the ‘essence’ of an artistic
masterpiece – the form of Christ demonstrates the same ineluctable “interior rightness
and evidential power” as a unique “work of art.” 110 Psychological, historical and
sociological approaches to religion are ultimately fruitless in that they cannot allow one
to grasp the unity of the indissoluble divine form—to perceive the perfect divine
Gesamtkunstwerk which shines out, uniquely and radiantly, in the midst of human
history.

109 GL1, 464.
110 Ibid., 465.
Accordingly, the “subjective evidence” which Balthasar explores in detail in the middle section of the first volume of *Herrlichkeit* cannot be considered apart from the “objective evidence” of the divine self-disclosure—God’s revelation of himself in the person of Christ. In Balthasar’s terms, the “light of faith” (*lumen fidei*)—the supernatural illumination which allows one to “see the form”—radiates outward from the form; faith, defined as a kind of “seeing” with transfigured “eyes of faith,” cannot be described in abstraction from “the compellingness of the form of revelation itself.”

Just as Rilke’s *Archaic Torso of Apollo* demands that “you must change your life,” the aesthetic encounter with revelation is transformative; it must be seen on its own terms, in its own powerful and enrapturing singularity.

As Aidan Nichols describes it, in the ever-circling process of vision and rapture which attends seeing the form of God incarnate, “the glory of God in Christ can be seen only by the eyes of faith but the eyes of faith can only see when the light of faith falls on them from the divine form of Jesus Christ.”

In other words, the “subjective unity of faith and vision” remains “incomprehensible” without the unity of the “objective revelation”—the form gives light that it may be seen.

Here it becomes simply impossible to distinguish between objective and subjective, between apologetic ‘proofs’ that are based on external facts and the

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113 *GL1*, 435.
so-called inner light of faith that shows us the secret correctness ... The simple eyes of faith do not see the shining truth inwardly in itself, but in the objective gospel. ... This shining of the truth shines for them, into them, and thus within their very selves.\textsuperscript{114}

The emphasis on both “vision” and “rapture,” the two movements Balthasar identifies as the constituent elements of an authentic theological aesthetics, tends towards the object of contemplation: the form. The “eye of faith” is a gift of grace, not an innate human faculty which can be teased out by cultural analysis; the form transcends all other (mythological, cultural, aesthetic) forms, ‘outstripping’ them even in their closest approximation of transcendence. To “measure” earthly aesthetics via a theological aesthetics, then, reveals the ever-greater dissimilarity between the two. Balthasar writes,

The measure which Christ represents and embodies is qualitatively different from every other measure. This fact need not be deduced; it may be read off the phenomenon itself. To be sure, for this an ‘eye for quality’ is required, analogous to the eye of the connoisseur which can infallibly distinguish art from kitsch. In a certain sense such an ‘eye’ may be acquired (Heb. 5.14), but in essence it must be bestowed along with the phenomenon itself. ... What, as the grace of faith, illumines the subject that approaches the phenomenon has to be the objective light that indwells it—its objective and radiant rightness.\textsuperscript{115}

Perception of the form—and we must remember that one of Balthasar’s aims is to develop a proper doctrine of “Christian perception,” employing all of the physical and spiritual senses—is shaped and illumined by the form itself. When one then finally turns to the world graced with the “eyes of faith,” it is a mode of vision which sees all things

\textsuperscript{115} GL1, 481.
through a christocentric lens—Christ as the “Form of forms” in whom all mythology, history and even material being find their fullness.

Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, conceived of as something of an introduction to this innovative theological method, thus ends up being a magisterial exploration of the emergence and perdurance of the supreme “form,” firstly in the realm of the church (from the Church Fathers through to the mystics), as a counterpoint to Greek metaphysics, from within myth, poetry and drama, and finally in the Old and New Testaments themselves (volumes two through seven of Herrlichkeit). In all of these preliminary forms we come to see or “behold” the perfect proportions of promise and fulfillment, the integrity of the unique form, the radiance of grace; all the scholastic ‘aesthetic’ categories brought to their zenith in the one unique form – and so in earthly forms pointers to the supreme Beauty of God made manifest in flesh. Here is Balthasar’s transcendental method for a phenomenology of earthly and divine beauty. Oliver Davies sums this up well:

Balthasar ... locates his thought securely within the classical tradition ... This tradition asserts that Being (which it would prefer to capitalize) has a certain luminosity and intrinsic attractiveness or splendour, and that it is linked in particular with the theme of eros, as the active principle of longing or attraction. This offers Balthasar an entirely new analysis of the ground of faith which is now removed from the propositional realm and is refigured as a ‘movement’ of the soul which is akin to the response we feel before the immense complexity of meaning, expression, and ‘form’ of a major work of art.116

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116 Davies, in The Cambridge Companion, 134.
It is clear by now Balthasar’s primary concern is not with interrogating Wahrnehmen – perception, “the seeing of what is true” – as applied to “this-worldly” forms such as art, but to the perception of Christian revelation. Here, as always, Balthasar’s interest in the “this-worldly” work of art passes over to “God’s greatest work of art,” Christ—the form which, when beheld, demands that everything else be seen in its light. It is a form, displaying the perfect “inevitability” of a masterpiece, which “overwhelms” through its excess. The theodramatic contours of the life of Christ, from the fulfillment of his destiny to the total destitution of the cross and the tomb, together form an irrepeateable, ‘individual’ “whole.” The operative analogy here is that of the painting—one thinks of the enormous canvases of a Gericault or David, or in the modern age of Rothko or Pollock—which “overwhelm” the beholder, transfixing them in a moment of perception and engendering a kind of spontaneous perceptual “rapture.” This is the ‘moment’ in our beholding of a work of art which Balthasar is keen to employ as an analogy of “seeing the form”—the point at which the beholder is taken up by the artwork in its irresistible self-disclosure. Yet one must recognize at once that “the image of Christ cannot be ‘taken in’ as can a painting: its dimensions are objectively infinite,” precisely because Christ is the revelation of the infinitely self-giving, self-expropriating God. Balthasar’s emphasis on God’s self-giving in the economy of salvation is anchored in a larger, Trinitarian account of kenosis. The nature of the Godhead is mutual self-emptying, a continual outflow in love. Christ “did not consider equality with

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117 GL1, 24.
118 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Revelation and the Beautiful,” in ET1, 117.
119 GL1, 512.
God something to be grasped” and “emptied himself... even unto death” (Phil. 2): here we have the centerpiece of a theological aesthetics, divine self-bestowal brought to the point of self-dispossession. To see the form of Christ—from the heights of glory to his ‘passive’ participation in human death on Holy Saturday—is to behold a phenomenon which surpasses aesthetics and idolatry, a divine beauty worthy of the name “glory.”

Theology itself, following Pseudo-Dionysius, is thus a matter of eros—not a bracketing or parsing of reason and desire, nor the dry, ‘scientific’ Suarezian scholasticism Balthasar was schooled in, but a spiritual pursuit driven by mystical desire; its form is shaped by its unique content. Faith (seeing with the “eyes of faith”), which is teased out into Christian experience of both the world and of mission, is essentially “mediated” erotic experience of the christomorphic form—mediation which occurs primarily through the Scriptures and the Church, in whose sacramental life the “archetypal” experience of Mary, the apostles and other “eye-witnesses” to the primal phenomenon of God’s appearance in Christ are continually made perceptible (and so able to be appropriated). The Church possesses an “eye of faith” which is able to see the “whole phenomenon” of the Christ; it is ‘within’ her that the diverse texts of the Scriptures can be heard to “form a magnificent polyphony” – with Christ at the centre, available to perception like a beautiful statue that can only be truly appreciated from multiple angles. Balthasar is thus open to any mode of (ecclesial) theology that can open up new ways of “seeing the form” – so long as it is shaped by the definitive revelation of God in Christ, situating his

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120 GL1, 301ff.
121 Balthasar, “Theology and Aesthetic,” 65.
unique life, death and resurrection at the very centre of its vista. This, for Balthasar, is the scope and methodology of a robust, biblical “theological aesthetics”—the light of faith opening up onto the unique form, which “impresses” itself upon the mediating realities of Tradition, Scripture and cosmos and expresses itself in the creative activities of artists and poets. It is thus also the starting-point for a Balthasarian phenomenology of art. As Mario Saint-Pierre notes, Balthasar discovers in the “phenomenologico-aesthetic” dynamic of subject and object a “more profound metaphysic that opens itself to the theological: the visible manifestation of the Christ as a Word which captures our being.”122 This revelation of God in the flesh, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, casts Being, flesh, and art in new light.

**Ethical Implications**

The famous opening section of Balthasar’s aesthetics takes aim at an “aestheticism” which would, in its bourgeois taste for art as ornament—taste that quickly devolves into kitsch, in both art and religion—remain superficial rather than opening itself to desire for transcendent Beauty. In *Theo-Drama* Balthasar reiterates his dissatisfaction with post-Kantian attempts to separate art from Being with reference to twentieth-century art:

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We need to make it clear that “l’art pour l’art” is a totally derivative and depraved form of the encounter with beauty: the blissful, gratis, shining-in-itself of the thing of beauty is not meant for individualistic enjoyment in the experimental retorts of aesthetic seclusion: on the contrary, it is meant to be the communication of a meaning with a view to meaning’s totality; it is an invitation to universal communication and also, preeminently, to a shared humanity.123

For Balthasar, being “broken open” by beauty contains an ethical imperative—the Rilkean sense of a “divine summons to change one’s life.”124 Here, as with Balthasar’s original meditations on Mozart, the model comes from the world of music. When the work of art “captivates” and “opens itself to us,” the whole person enters into a “state of vibration and becomes responsive space, the ‘sounding box’ of the event of beauty occurring within him.”125 Such attunement (Stimmung) is the natural outcome of “seeing the form”:

This brings home to us that an apparent enthusiasm for the beautiful is mere idle talk when divorced from the summons to change one’s life. At the same time the event of the beautiful is not to be held utterly transcendent, as if it derived solely from outside and above. To ascribe such an event to “being” while detaching it from the “coming to be” would be to annul metaphysics by the very act which seeks to establish it.126

Balthasar’s approach is thus completely opposed to Clive Bell’s view, for example, that the contemplation of “pure form” can only occur in a state of “extraordinary exaltation

125 GL1, 221.
126 “Revelation and the Beautiful,” ET1, 107-108.
and complete detachment from the concerns of life.”\textsuperscript{127} Likewise, as we shall see in an upcoming chapter, Balthasar avoids Schopenhauer’s model of complete detachment from the world and desire as the realm of ideal truth. Though he does offer a theological reading of Kant’s “disinterestedness,” filtered through Eckhart and Heidegger, this does not mean art somehow dissociates the subject from the world. Rather, Balthasar instead offers a model of the aesthetic form’s effect on the subject in terms of the Christian doctrine of \textit{election}. This is the interweaving of the aesthetic and ethical so important to Balthasar—to “see the form” is to respond to the “summons to change one’s life,” in other words to accept a mission. “An evening at the opera or a concert can be simply relaxation, but the encounter with beauty at a deep level is something else”—namely, a calling to action.\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Stimmung} (attunement) consists of openness—a willingness to be impressed as a whole person by the aesthetic content of revelation, namely the figure of Christ the masterpiece, and to then express this “form” in such a close way that one can speak of the Christian as having a “consonance” with God.\textsuperscript{129} This movement of “appropriation” and “expropriation” is an imperative both for the individual believer, who must be open in faith, to the Church as a whole. Here is where contemporary ventures to bring Balthasar’s theology into conversation with Orthodox doctrines of \textit{theosis} find their footing—to be divinized is to be made into Christ’s image, an awareness of the beauty of the Crucified which fashions those who “see the form” into his icons. As Brendan McInerny puts it, it is the “power of Beauty” which for Balthasar is

\textsuperscript{127} Clive Bell, \textit{Art} (New York: Stokes, 1914).
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{TD}2, 31.
\textsuperscript{129} See Bourgeois, 63-64.
supremely manifested in Christ which possesses the “power to draw the beholder out of herself and ‘into’ the object.”\textsuperscript{130} Deification finds its “measure” in the “Christ-form,” the “beautiful object” at the center of revelation which adumbrates both “the beauty of God that appears in man and the beauty of man which is to be found in God.”\textsuperscript{131} This dialogue or even participation between subject and object is a theological application of the intense relationship we have with a great work of art—we both know it and are known by it, and as it awakens desire (characterized in terms of vision and rapture) we are ourselves irrevocably altered.

**Artists and Saints**

With this in mind, we can better understand why, in *Explorations in Theology* Balthasar is deeply troubled that since the period of the medieval scholastics, few theologians have been saints. This is precisely the opposite of, for instance, the patristic period, where theological treatises were seamlessly integrated with spiritual exhortation and reflection, and theologians predominantly exercised a visible role (or office) in the Church; to be a theologian was to be a “true light” of the Church as both a teacher and pastor. Balthasar points to (among a host of others) Augustine, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and supremely Denis the Areopagite to illustrate the way in which “knowledge and life,” spirituality and doctrine, “theology and sanctity” were all interwoven in their life and


\textsuperscript{131} GL1, 477.
writings. Such an essential unity persisted even when these theologian-saints were at their most combative or apologetic. The connection between theology and personal holiness continued into the medieval era even in as “philosophical” a thinker as Anselm; similarly, the revived Aristotelianism of Aquinas and his contemporaries did not discard theology for logic but instead “raised” the “science of nature” to a theological plane. It was only after the zenith of the scholastic period (Albertus Magnus, Aquinas, Bonaventure) that theology withdrew from philosophy and the natural sciences, and in turn the “spirituality” of the mystics and saints became less a stream that nourished dogmatic or “systematic” theology than a self-contained body of experiences. On the one hand, neither Ignatius or John of the Cross “transposed” their mystical experiences into “appropriate dogmatic clothing,” as Gregory or Denis would undoubtedly have done; on the other hand, much post-scholastic theology has grown to be “bones without the flesh,” cut off from the “living organism” that is the Church in the fullness of revelation, incarnation and experience.

There is also Balthasar’s insistence on the intertextuality of his own work and the writings of his close friend, the mystic Adrienne von Speyr. Balthasar clearly saw their task as a “double mission” akin to that of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa, where the spiritual work of each would complement the other.132 Perhaps another analogy can be drawn between their decades-long relationship and the spiritual friendship between St. Francis and St. Clare, each inspiring the other to fuller expression of divine kenotic love.

132 Balthasar, Our Task, 16.
Von Speyr’s incarnation of the mystical, contemplative tradition in such close proximity to Balthasar’s theological work meant that the divide between understanding and prayer as a vehicle of illumination would be bridged in his “kneeling theology.” Yet it is also worth noting that the line between mystic and artist/poet is not so inflexible, as figures like St. John of the Cross, Ephrem the Syrian, and even Hopkins evince, and so we can perhaps characterize Balthasar’s immersion into the European literary and artistic tradition as of one piece with his role as the mediator of Adrienne’s lucid, expressive visions.

Balthasar’s constant suggestion is that we must examine anew what theology is, and how it is to be done. Most of all, with special reference to dogmatic theology which deals with the nature and structure of revelation itself, he reminds us that bridge-building between estranged disciplines is secondary to recovering the patristic sense of Christ as the “center” towards which all things have an almost “gravitational” pull. Theologians must not be drawn off in “peripheral” directions, prompted by scientific, historical-critical, or philosophical discoveries (as true or intriguing as they may be). Theology proper must be animated by desire for its subject, namely the revelation of the Triune God in Christ. Even our theological ontology must be situated within the “ascent” of philosophy and “descent” of revelation “as experienced by actual living according to Christ and the Church.” This is a “living and realized” theology which is grounded in the concrete, in the actualities of revelation in place and time, and above all in prayer. Like the saints, we must long to know God not just as a formal philosophical
principle, but as Father, Son and Holy Spirit active in human history. Theology must be “theology in prayer,” and finds its natural home and source of life in the dialogic, nuptial context of the Church.

Victoria Harrison describes Balthasar’s unique sense of personhood as flowing essentially from self-understanding in terms of mission. Following the Greek term *prosopon*, which connotes a theatrical mask, each person must assume their “role” in the great “divine-human drama,” fulfilling the archetypal “Idea” of their own life-mission (we could also say “life-form”) as given by God; to do so is to become a “person” in the fullest sense. To the extent that, through prayer, increasing in holiness and conformity to the “form” of Christ, one gains one’s identity and mission, God’s will is actualized in one’s life. Part of this actualization and shaping for mission involves death—the Pauline passing of an old self, of *personality*—and rebirth as an integrated *person*. As with his discussion of the saints in “Theology and Sanctity,” holiness, integration and centeredness happen within the context of dialogue, namely a “dramatic dialogue” where lived experience, presumably in relation to the concrete specificity of the Church, exists in a creative counterpoint with the divine call.

There is a definite aesthetic, artistic dimension to Balthasar’s model of subjective response and ethical action. Certainly there is an aesthetic radiance to the idea of being “called” by God to assume a particular role—we are reminded of the etymological link

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between beauty (*kalon*) and the verb “to call” (*kalew*). In Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, “the act of living (the obedience to the act of revelation which is brought about in man through the revelation) is the basis of the act of seeing.” One cannot see the form without coming into attunement (*Stimmung*). As one’s life takes on a particular shape or “form”—in the case of the theologian, as one’s thought and life finds its true “center” in Christ—it displays, discernibly, a striking holiness that can only be described as “beautiful.” The saints exhibit precisely this quality—a unity of thought, action and spirit that is ‘attractive’ in an almost irresistible way. What is more, they make manifest the “form” of Christ in their own conformity to his pattern of mission and obedience. The individual experience of the saint exists not only for its own sake but for the whole Church; appropriating this experience is a task of transposition for which the theologian is uniquely equipped.

The same can be said of the experience of the mystics, whose individual experiences must not be relegated to the margins (“flesh” without “bones”) but integrated into the mission and identity of the Church. Balthasar may have had Adrienne von Speyr, the woman whose mystical experiences of the Passion deeply influenced his own theology of the cross, in mind when he writes that the participative experience the saints have of the “mysterious inner world” of Christ’s unique suffering may be a rich resource for theologians. He saw part of his task as integrating her experience into a dogmatic

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134 *GL7*, 15.
theology, a small step toward healing the split between doctrine and spirituality which he detected in the modern discontinuity between theologian and saint.

Finally, the work of great artists (poiesis) can be seen as a contribution to Being. The artist engages in the production of beauty, both in imitating Nature and in a certain way mirroring divine creative activity as a kind of sub-creator. For Balthasar, as for the philosophical tradition, this means that artists in a particularly strong and unique way are “caught up close” to the “point of origin of Being,” namely the Triune God.\(^\text{135}\)

Attention to art and artists is thus theologically important—for the artist helps awaken us as subjects to listen for the call of Being.

Balthasar can be said to provide the possibility for a “renewed” phenomenology of art growing from the “comprehensive doctrine of Being” he elucidates in his deployment of Heidegger and a vast array of classical, modern and biblical sources. This possibility is borne out in his own methodology—an approach that can be described as interdisciplinary, integrative, and deeply attuned to both the "subjective" and "objective" aspects of our experience of form. Just as the masterpiece is a “miracle” with its own ineluctable power, so too is Christian revelation a matter not just of propositions but relies for its credibility upon the wildly inappropriate, counterintuitive language of “seeing the form.”

\(^\text{135}\) GL5, 605.
III: Being

Μόνος δ' ἔτι μῦθος ὁδοῖο
λείπεται ὡς ἔστιν· ταύτη δ' ἐπὶ σήματ' ἔσαι
πολλὰ μάλ', ὡς ἀγένητον ἐδώ καὶ ἀνώλεθρον ἔστιν,
ἔστι γὰρ οὐλομελές τε καὶ ἀτρεμές ἢδ' ἀτέλεστον·
oὐδὲ ποτ' ἢν οὐδ' ἔσται, ἔπει νῦν ἔστιν ὁμοῦ πάν,
ἐν, συνεχές· τίνα γὰρ γένναν διζήσεαι αὐτοῦ;
πὴ πόθεν αὐξηθέν; οὔτ' ἐκ μὴ ἐόντος ἐάσσω
φάσθαι α' οὐδὲ νοεῖν· οὗ γὰρ φατόν οὐδὲ νοητὸν
ἔστιν ὃπως οὐκ ἔστι.

One path only is left for us to speak of, namely, that It is. In it are very many tokens that what is, is uncreated and indestructible, alone, complete, immovable and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be; for now it is, all at once, a continuous one. For what kind of origin for it will you look for? In what way and from what source could it have drawn its increase?

Parmenides, On Nature

What interests us here is that we are present at the very origin of art.¹

G.W.F. Hegel, Aesthetics

Introduction

The previous chapter investigated in a preliminary way a question at the centre of Balthasar’s phenomenology of art: what does it mean for the work of art to be unique,

transcending all previous categories? As we saw in the chapter on art as “miracle,”

Balthasar’s phenomenological method centres on the self-showing (Erscheinung) of the
radiant form, an objective rather than subjective revelation. The work of art awakens
desire, wonder, and imagination in the viewer because of its intrinsic uniqueness and
singularity—its “self-evidential” truth, rightness, and beauty, terms which echo the
classical language of the clarity, integrity, and radiance of being. In particular, Christ is
for Balthasar the supremely unique artistic form, and so also is the measure of all
earthly forms.

In the following two chapters, this question about the uniqueness of the form is paired
with another, closely related question: what does it mean for a work of art to be
original? Or more pointedly, to adopt an ancient question posed forcefully in the
twentieth century by Martin Heidegger, what is the “origin” of the work of art? In
posing this question, I aim to recover Balthasar’s metaphysical perspective, central to
his theological aesthetics and echoed in his theological dramatics and logic, as a
resource for contemporary theological aesthetics which bridge between religion and art.
In particular, I follow Balthasar in holding up wonder as the shared origin of religion and
art, unfolding this concept not in the purely philosophical-ontological terms offered by
Hegel and Heidegger (and, perhaps by extension, Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner) but in
light of the specific contours of Christian revelation. Chapter 3 sets up the discussion by

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2 In thinking about origins, there may be a link here between the “origin” of the
work of art and Darwin’s The Origin of Species – both summon the spectre of
nineteenth-century historical consciousness in purposefully disruptive ways.
examining two influential accounts (Hegel and Arthur Danto) of art’s “origin” and “end.”

I then turn to the fourth and fifth volumes of Balthasar’s *The Glory of the Lord* to follow his genealogy of art and Being from the Greeks to the modern period. Chapter 4 revisits this same theme by revisiting Balthasar’s aesthetics in conversation with Heidegger’s seminal essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” This yields an understanding of both Balthasar’s appropriation of Heidegger in the pursuit of a theological aesthetics and his departure from Heidegger in espousing the theological difference (as enshrined in the analogy of Being), not just the ontological difference, as providing an adequate account of the primal wonder which animates both art and theology.

The term “metaphysics” is not a popular one in contemporary philosophy of religion, which even at its most theological (Richard Kearney, Jean-Luc Marion) occupies a “postmetaphysical” landscape. There is no question that for Balthasar a theological aesthetics is closely linked with a doctrine of Being—a metaphysics writ large. Thus as Junius Johnson points out, Balthasar’s metaphysics seem to fall “squarely in the realm of those types of projects Derrida had in his sights” in his early work: structures with an immovable *arche* (origin) serving as organizing principle and guarantor of meaning.\(^3\)

However, what Balthasar means by this is not simply a Neo-Platonic hierarchy of procession and return, but an account of Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and Being centered on the theodramatic revelation of the Triune God in human history—a theo-aesthetics which yields to a theological dramatics, which moreover is philosophically anchored by

\(^3\) Johnson, 9.
its own unique “logic.” In particular, Balthasar’s project leads to a “christological aesthetics” where Christ is the ultimate artistic form and the medium of divine glory. For Balthasar, “theological aesthetics culminates in the christological form.”\(^4\) I thus propose that understanding Balthasar’s contributions to the ongoing “theology and the arts” conversation must go beyond his concerns to rehabilitate Beauty as a transcendental in the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord* and into the metaphysical, ontological, and phenomenological concerns of the later volumes, particularly volumes IV and V which elucidate the transformation of metaphysics in the ancient and modern periods. As we shall see in future chapters, the theological implications of his approach to the ontology of art are further developed via relevant dimensions of his thought beyond *Herrlichkeit* – particularly the anthropological contours of the *Theo-Drama* and the dialogical “phenomenology of truth” Balthasar outlines in *Theo-Logic*.\(^5\)

**G.W.F. Hegel**

What is the origin of the work of art? Before examining Balthasar’s “Heideggerian” approach to this fundamental question, it is helpful to look at two influential philosophical and historical accounts of the origin of the work of art in order to provide sufficient context. One of the most important quests for the “origin” of what we term

\(^{4}\) *GL1*, 646.

\(^{5}\) Viladesau recognizes that an account of Balthasar’s work cannot rest content with the aesthetics, to the neglect of the dramatics and logic: “The later parts of Balthasar’s triad are crucial to understanding the context and limitations of his theological aesthetics.” *Theological Aesthetics*, 31.
the work of art is the one undertaken by G.W.F. Hegel in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. For Hegel, art and religion have a shared origin in that they both strive to find appropriate sensuous symbols in which to manifest the absolute. Hegel outlines the way in which this necessary manifestation of the invisible in the visible has been undertaken in the history of art and philosophy. Indian and Egyptian art, for example, serve for Hegel as the typical form(s) of primitive religio-mythical art whereby what is “grand and mysterious, a concealed power which reveals itself” is represented in “sensuous images.” (We can think here of Tillich’s language of painting as summoning the “power of Being.”) In Hegel’s typology, the gods and the elements of nature are by nature invisible and overwhelming, so they must be made manifest in symbols which “address” both mind and senses simultaneously. Thus “the sentiment of art like the religious sentiment… is born of wonder,” an awareness of the palpable presence of the gods mediated through the artwork.⁶

Alongside this emphasis on wonder and the sensuous, Hegel brings to the foreground the importance of human agency in artistic creation, the realm of what he terms Spirit. For Hegel, artistic beauty is “higher” than natural beauty because it has been shaped by the human mind. While natural objects are “simple,” in art there is a kind of reduplication performed by the human mind; objects are transformed or transfigured into vehicles of self-expression and thus self-realization. Art thus yields a “born again” beauty. “The universal need for expression in art lies, therefore, in man’s rational

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impulse to exalt the inner and outer world into a spiritual consciousness for himself, as an object in which he recognizes his own self.’” This is, in a sense, similar to the way Ludwig Feuerbach conceived of religion in the nineteenth century—as a kind of self-mirroring activity of humanity. Marx also picks up on this self-reflecting function, and recast it instead the area of social action and economic alienation.

In Hegel’s art history, the dynamic tension between the divine and the sensuous takes on a different and more complicated shape in the Classic period, where instead of summoning and re-presenting the gods and the “elements of nature” in the artwork, the individual artist employs poetic imagination in order to fashion the universal into an ideal (anthropomorphic) form—sculpture, Hegel notes, being the most appropriate medium for this manifestation. In the third, Romantic mode, however, the idea itself comes to the fore over and above the form itself. Spirit becomes self-conscious, and the artist breaks the form in order to penetrate to philosophical truth. “In this last stage of the development of art the beauty of the Classic ideal, which is beauty under its most perfect form and in its purest essence, can no longer be deemed a finality; for spirit now knows that its true nature is not to brought into a corporeal form.” This does not mean Hegel champions abstract art—for him, all art must deal in particulars, in the concrete and sensuous. Even when it has been superseded by philosophy, the material, presencing power of art still plays a valuable role in thought’s representing thought to itself. Nonetheless, for Hegel the trajectory of art history moves from religion to art to

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7 Ibid.
philosophy—from divinized forms to broken ones.\(^8\)

Art, then, like religion represents ideas in sensuous forms, making it a kind of bridge between cognition and sense (XIII). However, art can only represent a certain type of concept; it is not the “supreme and absolute” mode of thought, which in the present age is identified with philosophy. In the past, works of art could be “venerated as divine” (I.XVII); now, in Hegel’s milieu, we instead experience art via the subjective, Kantian modes of “judgment” and “enjoyment.” Hegel thus expresses an endemic “pessimism” about art: art is not what it once was; only philosophy can bring us to the fullness of truth. Nevertheless, art is valuable and unique in its bridging of the sensuous and ideal—it serves a noble, though penultimate, “end.”

The preceding chapter examined the aesthetic in the work of Immanuel Kant, who was striving to find a way to speak of a universal standard of beauty even though we naturally approach it from varying, ‘subjective’ points of view. Hegel, while appreciative of Kant’s contribution to aesthetics or “kallistics”—especially the attention he drew to the inherent tension between subjectivity and objectivity with reference to our concept of beauty—nevertheless felt that Kant’s solution ultimately fails to bridge the gap between subject and object:

[Kant] comes to a standstill in the contradiction of subjectivity and objectivity, so that although he suggests in the abstract a solution of the contradiction of concept and reality, universality and particularity, understanding and sense, and thereby points to the Idea, yet, on the other hand, he makes this solution and reconciliation itself a purely *subjective* one, not one which is true and actual in its nature and on its own merits.\(^9\)

In other words, Kant fails to achieve a *synthesis* or integration of subjective and objective, and thus is unable to access the true nature of the beautiful. Positively, Kant understood that we must understand objects as purposive—that is to say, as having a teleological dimension, as if they had a sort of *telos* or “end” in an Aristotelian sense. This, for Hegel, seems to be a step in the right direction, as is Kant’s idea of the particular as a ‘spontaneous’ appearance of the universal. However, for Hegel it is only Schiller who has truly “broken through”\(^10\) Kantian subjectivity to the true unity of all of the polarities that seem to occur in our perception of the aesthetic (subjective vs. objective, necessity vs. freedom, sensuous vs. rational) to what is really true and real, namely the Idea. So although “Hegel’s ontology has its roots in Kant’s aesthetic” he ‘transcends’ Kant by making the subject much more than the locus of disinterested “taste.”\(^11\) For Hegel, the mind of the thinking, perceiving human being transforms the objects it comes into contact with, in effect coming to consciousness of itself in its interaction with them, which further is part of a larger, historical process of Spirit (*Geist*) realizing itself through human culture. Hegel, looking at the historical progression of art

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\(^9\) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Chapter IV, LXXVII.
\(^10\) Ibid., LXXXIII.
through prehistory to the Romantic impulse, can thus speak of the “end of art” in a nonironic way—art is free to end when it is no longer culturally necessary, in other words once it has represented human being to itself and can so cede its truth-disclosing role to philosophy.

As we shall see, the account of art history Balthasar gives in his theological aesthetics can be seen as a redaction of Hegel’s view. For Balthasar, art is also born of wonder and deeply embedded in the sensuous. However, for him the twists and turns of the history of art (and literature) are less evolutionarily related than they are christologically unfolded. The “origin” and “end” of art for Balthasar is not the Idea, conceived of in Hegelian terms, but God-made-flesh in human culture.  

**Arthur Danto**

A second, more recent typology of the origin of art serves as an interesting parallel narrative to Hegel’s historical sequence. In his famous history of the philosophy of art *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, celebrated twentieth-century art theorist Arthur Danto suggests that there are two types of “appearance” at work in artistic

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representation which can be discerned in visual history. The example he gives to distinguish between the two is Nietzsche’s discussion of the Dionysian rites in ancient Greece. In the frenzy of celebration at these festivals, “at the climactic moment,” the god Dionysius was understood to become tangibly present in the midst of his followers—a mystical appearance that could best be described as a type of magical “re-presentation.” Each time the rites were celebrated, the god was “literally” and palpably present—though perhaps not visibly so. Art thus implies ‘real’ presence, and so the artist possesses “the power of making a given reality present again in an alien medium.” Danto gives the example of a medieval painter who renders in pigment the crucifixion of Christ; the goal is not just imitation, but to make this event palpably and “miraculously present” each time the painting is seen.

The second type of “appearance” relies on a distinction between appearance and reality, a conceptual division which for Danto is only possible with the rise of philosophy in the later Greek period. Over time, the Dionysian revels became ritualized, symbolic enactments—the birth of tragic drama—rather than “literal” invocations of a deity. Here the “presence” invoked in the artwork is not a “real” one, but a mimetic representation. It is in this latter mode where, for Danto, we come closer to a modern understanding of

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14 Ibid., 20. Danto links this premodern paradigm to a much more basic example: when one looks up into the heavens and sees a star, “the thing itself appears,” and so it makes no sense to say the visible star is “only an appearance” (the speed of light notwithstanding). What appears is simply the object (or person, or god) itself.
15 Ibid., 78.
art and the aesthetic—to the work of art conceived of as something distinct from what it expresses. The primal, religious roots of artistic creativity may lie in the first, more immediate type of “re-presentation,” but a self-reflexive concept of “art” only emerges when a culture distinguishes appearance from reality. Danto accordingly suggests that the rise of art is related to the rise of metaphysics—a concept of “art” as a zone of meaning distinct from “reality” as well as a disentangling of philosophy from religion and myth. “Self-consciously mimetic art arose together with philosophy in Greece, almost as if the latter found in the former a paradigm for the entire range of problems to which metaphysics is the response.”

For Danto, this disentangling of reality from art and vice versa finds its most extreme form in the discourse of modern art, the paradigmatic example of which is Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* (1964). Here the process of reflecting on “what is real?” and “what is art?” comes full circle—art is simply a re-presentation of a real object, seemingly without any aesthetic intervention. The work of art originates on the assembly line, not as a theophany (or, as in Hegel’s view, as a self-mirroring of the Idea). Moreover, the mass-produced nature of the object—its mass-produced, technological “origin” - calls into question the very notion of an autonomous, original object; in the age of the simulacrum, the perfect copy for which no original exists, the “origin” of art as even a possibility is called into question. The process of abstraction has reached its necessary

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16 Ibid., 82.
17 Brian Massumi has problematized the traditional definition of a simulacrum as “a copy of a copy whose relation to the model has become so attenuated that it can no
end, so that the real evaporates through *mimesis*. The twentieth century, then, is the point of closure for philosophical aesthetics—“the end of art,” as Danto has famously called it.\(^{18}\)

Much aesthetic discourse after Danto’s “end of art” has thus concerned itself not with art’s mythico-religious origins, but its social role. Nicholas Bourriaud, for example, suggests that though in past epochs the role of art was to serve as an intermediary between man and the divine, that era has long come to an end. Art history can be thought of as the trajectory whereby aesthetic concern moves from consideration of humankind in relation to the gods (the classical paradigm) to humankind in relation to the object (modernism) to humanity’s explorations of inter-human relations (what Bourriaud terms “relational aesthetics”).\(^{19}\)

Danto, for his part, is interested in rehabilitating the “abused” concept of beauty.\(^{20}\) Yet he does so without reference to Being, preferring to speak of beauty as only one of

\(^{18}\) See Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2003), 18-21. For Danto, the (Hegelian) term “the End of Art” is not an entirely negative assessment: art after the End of Art has, if anything, a fuller range of potentialities available to it, of which beauty is one among many.

\(^{19}\) Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 28.

\(^{20}\) “It is widely and sometimes cynically said that art has replaced religion in contemporary consciousness. My speculation is that these Victorian or Edwardian attitudes have survived the abjuration of beauty itself... The idea of beauty, the poet Bill Berkson wrote me recently, is a “mangled sodden thing.” But the *fact* of beauty is quite another matter.” Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 29.
many ways to understand contemporary art. Danto rightly points out that the only way to force all contemporary art to fit under the rubric of ‘beauty’ is by subordinating the actual character of the work to what he calls “the narrative of aesthetic redemption”\(^\text{21}\)—the misguided attempt to see even in works that are patently “ugly” (or at least non-beautiful, such as a soup can or Brillo Box) a kind of beauty, and thus to validate them according to a certain view of the aesthetic over against their own original purpose and character. This, for Danto, is an aestheticism which covers over the complexity of art.

**Balthasar’s Genealogy of Art\(^\text{22}\)**

Both Hegel and Danto, in their philosophical-historical inquiry, thus suggest an “end of art” even as they reach back into antiquity to find its “origin.” Danto and Hegel’s genealogies of art thus provide helpful springboards from which to investigate Hans Urs von Balthasar’s approach to the “origin” of the singular artwork. Like Danto and, as we shall see, Heidegger, Balthasar also returns to ancient Greece to find the covered-over “origin” of art. Danto suggests that though art’s roots lie in the mythical and religious—the invocation of the presence of the god in the artwork—with the birth of philosophy, art and metaphysics must exist in abstraction from both reality and theophanic appearances. Balthasar is interested in returning metaphysics, and art with it, precisely to these primal, theological roots, recognizing that the “fugitive” (as in Heidegger)  

\(^{21}\) Danto, 49.  
presence of the gods in the artwork does not dissipate in modernity. For Balthasar, the birth of metaphysics as a science in ancient Greece is not a break with the mythico-religious, but its natural explication: metaphysics and philosophy cannot be separated from “holy knowledge about the origins of the world (mythos)” nor from the True, Good, and Beautiful. Philosophy and art are rather rooted in a shared, mythico-religious sense of wonder (thaumazein). As Socrates says in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, “wonder is the feeling of the philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.”23 This is a priority uncovered by Heidegger and deeply valued by Balthasar, who thus prefers a Heideggerian art history as opposed to the track taken by Hegel.

The historical sequence is secondary—a more ‘mythical’ period which meets and expresses that which is, more strongly by means of dramatic images; then a more ‘philosophical’ period’ which turns away from the images and conceives of that which is, in concepts; then a more ‘religious’ period which again relativizes these concepts by pointing to the mystery. The myth is already essentially religious and the philosophy is neither able nor willing to deny its mythical past, especially when it is concerned with the aspect of the *kalon*.24

It is in this re-writing of Hegel’s genealogy where Balthasar most succinctly defines art:

“All great art is religious, an act of homage before the glory of what exists.”25 Balthasar’s philosophy of art, if one is to speak of it, is deeply ontological, concerned with the disclosure of Being through created forms. If one traces art back to its source—namely, the Greek notion of *thaumazein* or primordial wonder, “the elemental experience of the

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25 Ibid., 13.
mystery of reality,” it becomes clear that art can never fully leave behind its disclosive, presencing power. For Balthasar, the modern concept of aesthetics, which separates art, metaphysics, and religion, is a movement away from art’s fundamental origin in the heart of Being. It is this ontological reality which animated the Greeks in both art and philosophy. The Greeks are thus the necessary first stop in Balthasar’s “metaphysical history of aesthetics,” his account of the mediation of glory in the Western tradition: “Anyone who speaks of mythical-religious interpretation also speaks of art in its most original act of generation, art in the womb of its most favourable development. Before Plato began his philosophical work the great period of Greek art in all its domains was already completed.”

Classical philosophy emerges in conversation with the arts. Thus rather than representing a rupture between religion and art, the great philosophers like Plato and Aristotle are for Balthasar the children of Homer, carrying forward his mythico-poetic vision.

**Balthasar’s Reading of Classical Aesthetics**

For the Greeks, following the heroic template laid down in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, human existence is essentially hermeneutical—the individual’s interpretation of his relationship to the divine. The drama of mankind plays out and is only intelligible when read in light

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26 *GL5*, 432.
27 *GL4*, 38.
of the larger drama of the gods. Drawing on Heidegger, Balthasar characterizes this existential posture as a betweenness or being held out into Being. This standing out against the backdrop of Being and the gods is the origin of both religion and art, “in which [man] makes for himself utterance about the world and form.” Art subsists in the vulnerable and risky space between the gods and man. Beauty, even more so, is defined in terms of the “essential relationship between the god (who of course is in himself shining and light) and the man who is raised up into the light of the gods.”

The world of men lies exposed to the eyes of the gods and man somehow sees the gods and ‘is ashamed’ before them because he is transparent and is seen by them; as he looks on things and knows them, he perceives the forms of things which have already been seen through and illuminated in this double act of seeing, finite and infinite, and bear on themselves the seal of truth.

Here this-worldly standards of proportion and radiance are not the measure of the beautiful, but rather beauty breaks forth from the divine. Answering this divine openness, in art, mankind is broken open by the divine beauty: “The world is to be understood as the epiphaneia of the divine to man and as man’s being broken open so that he may grasp this appearing.” Stated in more modern (and Heideggerian) terms, the radical “openness of being”—human existence or Dasein “polarized” by its experience of the mysterium tremendum et fascinans—is for Balthasar the origin of art

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28 Ibid., 45.  
29 Ibid., 52.  
30 Ibid., 22.  
31 Ibid., 21.
(“the great religious or ‘mythological’ art of all people”).\textsuperscript{32} For Balthasar, like Hegel, human encounter with the infinite \textit{mysterium} is the original engine of artistic creation; even the most “classical,” refined art begins from “the open wound in the heart of being and of man in which being becomes illuminated.”\textsuperscript{33} Passing back beyond the “science” of modern aesthetics developed by Baumgarten and Kant, Balthasar (like Heidegger) looks back all the way to Greek metaphysics for an “aesthetic” which is not fragmentary but “anchored in an entire truth and goodness”—that of the divine, of the gods.\textsuperscript{34} It is this ontological aesthetics (“a return to a pre-Kantian position”\textsuperscript{35}) which Balthasar then follows through the ages into the Christian era.

\textbf{On Wonder}

Balthasar thus eschews an account of art’s origin based on the disentangling of ideas, religion, and the work of art itself in favour of an understanding rooted in wonder. The central philosophical question for both Heidegger and Balthasar is a classic and basic one—“why is there something rather than nothing?”—namely, the question of \textit{Being}. The classic formulation of this statement is by Leibniz in his \textit{On the Ultimate Origination of Things} (1697), where he argues that the reason things exist is that intrinsically “being

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{32} \textit{“Revelation and the Beautiful,”} 105.
\bibitem{33} \textit{GL}4, 29.
\bibitem{34} Ibid., 19.
\end{thebibliography}
prevails over non-being.”\(^\text{36}\) Though it could be otherwise, things tend to be. This simple yet compelling question serves as a key animating principle in Balthasar's thought, and guides his theology from front to back. For as Balthasar asks, "how can someone who is blind to Being be anything but blind to God?"\(^\text{37}\) The fact of existence, its "thereness" \((Da)\) as "a mysterious wonder" is precisely what has been lost in much philosophical and theological discourse, which he aims to recover.\(^\text{38}\) Being for Balthasar is and must be "the object of an unquenchable interest, indeed, of a reverent, astonished wonderment."\(^\text{39}\)

For Balthasar a scientific or philosophical ontology which takes Being as necessary - in short, a philosophy which sees nature not as the free creation of a freely creative God, but as a bare fact without contingency—may well be able to reach the point of a modest admiration at the order and harmony of the universe. This, Balthasar points out, is good as far as it goes and characterizes much secular discourse about the nature of the

\(^{\text{36}}\) “But in order to explain a little more distinctly how temporal, contingent, or physical truths arise from eternal or essential or metaphysical truths, we must first acknowledge, from the fact that something exists rather than nothing, that there is in possible things, i.e. in possibility or essence itself, a certain demand for existence or (so to speak) a straining to exist, or (if may so put it) a claim to exist; and, to sum up in a word, essence in itself strives for existence.” This train of leads Leibniz towards his own theological “aesthetics,” where all things including evil are merely moments of dissonance within the larger harmony of the “universal beauty and perfection of the works of God.” Opera Philosophica, ed. J.E. Erdmann (Berlin: Eicher, 1839-40), 147-50. See also the discussion of Leibniz in Kosky, 4-9.

\(^{\text{37}}\) Hans Urs von Balthasar, My Work, 85, quoted in Scola, 39.


\(^{\text{39}}\) Ibid., 9.
cosmos. Yet such an understanding fails to grasp the truly radical character of ontological wonder. Wonder at Being “is not only the beginning of thought” but is also the *arche* (origin and “permanent element”) “in which [thought] moves.” Art which recovers a sense of wonder thus reconnects us to a way of knowing—or, in Heideggerian terms, a way of dwelling—which lies buried beneath centuries of forgetfulness of Being and enlarges the horizon of questioning beyond the order of the universe to the marvel of existence itself.

Thought still has to reckon with the sheer fact that there is anything at all, that a thing emerges from nothingness and prefers being to nonbeing, and that it has the incomprehensible grace to be present and to offer itself to knowledge as an inexhaustible object ... What lays the mind flat is, not a second, extrinsic mystery ... but rather the burning core of the mystery of being itself.

Here Leibniz’s intuition that things “prefer being to nonbeing” is expressed in terms of mystery and appearance—a phenomenological account of Being. Balthasar also gives the question a distinctively theological flavor. The difference for the Christian is that the fundamental question of Being comes to be answered not in terms of a “Why” but a “What”—namely, the determinate content of revelation. Unlike Heidegger’s *Dasein*, the Christian “is obliged to understand Being in its ontological difference as pointing to love... the mystery of the fact that anything exists at all becomes for him yet more profound and in the comprehensive sense more worthy of enquiry than it does for any

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40 *GLS*, 614.
41 *TL1*, 106.
other kind of philosopher.” The answer to “why is there something rather than nothing?” is divine love, as expressed in Christ. Thus though all humans share a common relationship to Being, the Christian is uniquely the “guardian of that metaphysical wonderment which is the point of origin for philosophy and the continuation of which is the basis of its further existence.” The responsibility for metaphysics thus ultimately falls to the Christian. Nietzsche’s task of the “affirmation of Being” is thus a Christian imperative both ethically and aesthetically.

In being opposed to the non-ontological methodology of scientific aesthetics and a desire to recover a more fundamental, Greek integration of religion, art, and philosophy, Balthasar’s theological aesthetics can perhaps ironically thus be said to carve out an anti-aesthetic(s) stance similar to the one taken by Heidegger in his pivotal 1935 essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” Here the artwork is not a matter of universalized subjective taste (a modernist misreading of Kant which has unfortunately gained traction in the past two centuries) but a disclosure of the mystery of Being, an ontological, even mystical offering which lights up as if by lightning the primordial forces of earth and sky, humans and god(s). Balthasar, reinterpreting Heidegger in a Christian mode, similarly asserts that the proper context for understanding art is not just “aesthetics” as propounded by Kant and Baumgarten, but ontology—in particular,

\[42 \text{GL5, 646.}\]
\[43 \text{Ibid., 646.}\]
\[44 \text{Ibid., 652.}\]
\[45 \text{Ibid., 648.}\]
\[46 \text{Ibid., 415.}\]
wonder at the mystery of Being. For Balthasar, the great work of art is not just an ornament that pleases the senses and affections, but rather irrupts from the immeasurable depths of Being, radiating the transcendentals of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness—considered, of course, in relation to the all-encompassing backdrop of the divine. “Along with the seen surface of the manifestation [of the form] there is perceived the non-manifested depth: it is only this which lends the phenomenon of the beautiful its enrapturing and overwhelming character, just as it is only this that insures the truth and goodness of the existent. This holds both for the beauty of nature and the beauty of art ...”47 To emphasize the phenomenal is of critical importance; but to replace Being with a realm of unknowable noumena is disastrous. Rather, the appearance itself reveals (in a pattern of veiling and unveiling) the unfathomable depths of Being.

The Analogy of Being

A Balthasarian understanding of aesthetic experience has the distinct benefit of connecting the experience the subject has of “truth” and “beauty” in a “form” such as the artwork to the ultimate (and, for Balthasar, “objective”) horizon against which the work of art discloses these qualities, namely, the horizon of Being. The key term in Balthasar’s thought related to the nature (and, we might add, destiny) of Being is the analogy entis.48 The analogy entis or “analogy of being” is an important concept in

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47 GL1, 442.
Balthasar’s theology, the specific usage of which he adopted largely from Erich Przywara. It is intended to prevent theology from equating God with Being (Spinoza) or subordinating both God and being beneath an overarching umbrella of “Being” (onto-theology, the danger of “univocal” language, as in Duns Scotus) as well as from the opposite extreme of positing God as totally unknowable (i.e., completely unapproachable and incomprehensible to finite categories, an extreme “negative theology” that makes all theology or words about God impossible). Avoiding both of these extremes, Balthasar and Przywara interpreted the Christian theological tradition to demonstrate that there is an analogy between God’s “being” and creaturely being, between the heavenly and the earthly. So, there are analogical similarities—God’s love, beauty, goodness, justice, or unity can be spoken of with recourse to human categories, and these things are indeed true of the triune God (even within the “immanent” Trinity; Balthasar does not follow Rahner in collapsing the immanent and economic).

Karl Barth infamously called the *analogia entis* the work of the Antichrist, perhaps because he thought a Catholic doctrine of being as participation would distract from the “event-character” of revelation. For Balthasar, however, the analogy of being is precisely what allows one to “probe the possibility of there being a genuine relationship

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the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God? ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010).


between theological beauty and the beauty of the world”\textsuperscript{51} without collapsing them univocally into each other. Earthly beauty is not identical with divine beauty, or glory; the one forms an analogy with the other. But analogy is not identity. Following the Fourth Lateran Council, for every similarity that can be posed between the earthly and the divine, there is an ever-greater dissimilarity (\textit{maior dissimilitudino}), thus preserving both divine transcendence and the integrity of earthly beauty. Beauty “encapsulates” both divine and earthly beauty without making them identical or, particularly dangerously in a postmodern content, dissociating them completely in the “equivocity of sheer dialectic.”\textsuperscript{52}

In considering Beauty, “the finite spirit finds itself directed by the analogy of Being beyond itself” to the essential mystery of Being, across the “measure” which both connects and separates the natural from the transcendent.\textsuperscript{53} For Balthasar, the transcendental—-Beauty, Goodness, Truth, Oneness—-are participated in individual forms or existents across this resonant ‘analogue interval’ (in David Bentley Hart’s terminology). By their very nature they cannot be exhausted in any particular instantiation. For Balthasar, the rich ontology of the analogy of being thus allows us to perceive individual forms as truly disclosing mysterious, infinite depths. Rather than being simply an “appearance”, the form, in its self-showing, is a “manifestation and

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{GL1}, 450.
bestowal” of the “truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself.”\textsuperscript{54} Analogical participation is thus not just a revelation of the mystery of Being, but of God. Within the ambit of the \textit{analogia entis}, there can be “no question of a univocal transposition and application of categories”—and yet we have “a genuine unfolding of [God] in the worldly stuff of nature, man and history,” in short an “epiphany.”\textsuperscript{55} Earthly beauty, because it is analogous to divine or transcendental Beauty, calls us to an ecstatic movement towards God, authentically and mysteriously revealing the divine; as in Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, beauty is a stairway which leads us upwards, animated by \textit{eros}, to the (eschatological) vision of God.\textsuperscript{56} The \textit{analogia entis}, so conceived, thus nourishes a “theological aesthetics” at the most basic level—it provides the arena in which divine self-disclosure in which the form of divine Beauty is displayed to humanity, while safeguarding the divine from a too-close relationship with inner-worldly categories.

Balthasar’s approach to the \textit{analogia entis} is often misconstrued as a static, unbending structure which threatens divine and human freedom. Francesca Murphy explains why this is not the case: “For von Balthasar, the analogy of being is not a stable floor, or even an escalator, upon which human beings stand. It is a drama; a thing done. The stage is made in the interplay of human and divine characters.”\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 118.  
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 119.  
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 121.  
\textsuperscript{57} Francesca Aran Murphy, \textit{Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature} (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 18.
In other words, one cannot conceive of a transcendental theological aesthetics apart from a theological dramatics centered on Christ, who by virtue of the hypostatic union is the analogy of being in concrete form. To consider God’s action in human history is to be inexorably led towards the True, Beautiful, and Good; at the same time, to consider beauty, truth, and goodness as written into the cosmic order leads back to the dramatic revelation of God in Christ (and the Spirit). Balthasar aims to restore to contemporary theology something of the medieval mindset that “understood the historical salvation-event wholly within a comprehensive and cosmic context, to such an extent that the universal categories of beauty which we find in antiquity served largely as a conceptual language in which the total revelation of God—with its centre in Jesus Christ—was expressed.”

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are not just Neoplatonic structures buoying a univocal equation of God with Being, but rather Being is a transparency—an event, and more specifically the Christ-event—through which God “gives” of his Trinitarian self.

Thus for Balthasar, the question of the origin of the work of art takes on a Christological dimension. The work of artists ultimately finds its “origin” in Christ. For Balthasar, all earthly forms are related to Christ, who “takes up into himself all the forms of creation.” Here there are echoes both of Irenaeus’ recapitulation and of Bonaventure’s cosmic exemplarism, where Christ is the prototype for all earthly forms. For Bonaventure, the

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58 GL5, 9.
love that exists within the Trinity itself is what “explodes into a thousand forms” in creation; the endless patterns of multiplicity and diversity are already represented (in unity) in the person of the Son and expressed outward. In this way, the many “temporally unfolding forms” reveal analogically the movement of the Son going forth from the Father. It is only in Christ that forms receive their “completeness and perfection.” The forms of nature, for example, are eschatologically and ontologically related to Christ, the “First-Born of creation” (Col. 1) by virtue of the hypostatic union.

Human art and creativity also play a role in this Christocentric theology of form. The “creations of man in his cultural development” are “in greater measure” theological in origin—they “belong to [Christ] as the images which he has produced out of himself then to impress them upon the world” and to “have a continued existence in man.” Cultural and creative forms like the work of art are still one step below the “creations of grace” in the church. But for Balthasar, it is clear that artistic form finds both its “origin” and “end” in Christ, the form of forms—which is why Rouault’s paintings are so meaningful and evocative.

We can look not only to the “origin” of the work of art then, but to its eschatological “end.” The Protestant theologian Eberhard Jüngel echoes Balthasar in speaking of how

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60 Quoted in ibid., 182-83.
62 GL1, 679.
the “appearance of the beautiful” is only a “pre-appearance” of the fullness of truth; an interruption which reminds us of the existence of the theologically integrated, eschatological “whole.”63 Beauty and art are thus both “welcome and dangerous competitors” with theology, for they “anticipate that which faith has to declare.”64

This casts light on the “eschatological reduction” Balthasar pairs with his “eidetic reduction” in his phenomenology of glory. Art history is thus, in Balthasarian perspective, not just ontological but eschatological—works of human culture-making are related to Christ both in their disclosure of Being and in their orientation toward the fullness of the eschaton. For Jüngel as a Protestant, the eschatological is the key operating concept: “even the beautiful must die,” but the light of glory in the face of Christ only shines brighter. Balthasar, however, holds eschatology and ontology in fruitful tension: “For Protestantism beauty remains eschatological: but if the eschaton which is Christ has appeared in the midst of history, and if the rays of his resurrection already begin to brighten that history, then we should be permitted to speak of Christian beauty even here below.”65

A “christological aesthetics”66 is thus ultimately Balthasar’s beginning and end. The genealogy of glory Balthasar traces through Greek philosophy, subsequent philosophy

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63 Ibid., 76.
64 Ibid., 81.
65 GL1, 659.
and art history, and finally (in the last volumes of *Herrlichkeit*) the Scriptures themselves point to the Christ-form as the ultimate expression of divine glory, and as the one in whom art and culture find their fullness.

Aidan Nichols sums up Balthasar’s aesthetic christology with a simple formulation: what is on display on the cross is “glory as kenosis.” As Nichols points out, this does not mean that God’s glory is hidden *sub contrario* in Jesus, or that we are pointed to glory by coming face to face with its opposite—as one might glean from Luther. Such an understanding might imply a kind of Hegelian sublation (*Aufhebung*) of contradictory aesthetic realities, or a kind of negative illustration of glory by its lack rather than the paradoxical fullness of dialectic and analogy to be found in both Luther and Balthasar. Rather, in a Johannine vein, the glory of God is rendered *visible* in the cross—not “blindingly obvious” or “perfectly plain” in a flat sense, but supremely radiant and splendid for those who have eyes to see (illumined by the “light of faith” which shines from the form). Contrary to appearance, the transcendental qualities of Beauty, Truth and Goodness are not shut off, but are “disclosed” to the greatest possible extent in the supreme kenosis of the cross. Moreover, as Balthasar continues to emphasize throughout both *Herrlichkeit* and the five volumes of *Theo-Drama*, kenosis—divine self-emptying, as seen in such New Testament passages as Philippians 2—is itself a true

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68 Ibid., 37.
69 Ibid., 38.
revelation of the glory of the eternal, Triune God. For Balthasar the procession of the Son from the Father is a kind of anticipatory ‘kenosis’ eternally pre-existing in the life of the Trinity, though the terminology here is difficult. God’s self-disclosure in the Incarnation—which reaches a point of intensity in the cross and resurrection—flows directly out of his eternal self-giving (a kind of immanent “self-emptying” in the context of Trinitarian coinherence). The divine glory is thus manifested in the cross as a sign of God’s continuous, eternally unfolding love.

If we are seeking to define glory, the glory which surpasses or “outstrips” earthly beauty, we must look to Christ—to the concrete and radiant form of revelation. “To see Jesus means to see... the glory radiating from the Father.”71 The form of the cross appears as *Gestaltlosigkeit*, formlessness or the “deprivation of form.”72 Yet it is at precisely this point where the glory of the Lord (*Herrlichkeit*) takes on a determinate, visible historical “form” most clearly. David Luy calls this moment the aesthetic “collision,” where the analogical aesthetic categories Balthasar has established throughout *Herrlichkeit* are “intensified”—yet rather than ‘snapping,’ each of the three “tethers” which connect revelatory “forms” to, respectively, the “intra-trinitarian kenosis” on one side, the “categories of finite existence” on the other, and the “particular modality of sin and guilt” as necessary context, come together in a great, redemptive intersection. The seemingly disjunctive event of the cross thus becomes not the “culminating nodal point” where “each tether is perfectly preserved and expressed”

71 GL1, 667.
72 Ibid., 62.
— the “primal” or “archetypal” form. Rather than negating revelation, the cross—including both Christ’s death and subsequent descensus—remains the fullness of “revelation,” even as it shatters and dissolves the “image of eternal life”; we can never think of glory the same way. “The Cross thus becomes the entry point through which humanity encounters a new truth, a new goodness, and the awareness of the most provocative beauty.”

Much philosophical aesthetics, from Kant all the way back to Thomas Aquinas, has defined the beautiful as id quom visa placent, “that which, being seen, pleases.” The cross seems like an odd object of aesthetic “pleasure,” even more so of desire (eros). Yet Balthasar places this singular event—which must, of course, be seen in the larger context of the divine-human theo-drama—at the very heart of his aesthetics. By resolutely focusing on the cross, a theological aesthetics thus must neither, as one author puts it, “deny the ugly its place in a theology of God’s beauty or abstractly explain the ugly away.” A helpful distinction is thus drawn between “transcendental” and “inner-worldly” beauty; Christian beauty must include the cross and the “unbearable” aspects of existence which are “discarded” by a “worldly aesthetics”—it

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73 Luy, 157-168.  
74 Ibid., 154-155.  
76 Mongrain, 62.
must include evil and death, not by covering them over but by transforming them. The glory of the cross is transcendentally beautiful, though again not beautiful in an “earthly” sense. As Raymond Gawronski notes, “the aesthetics of the cross is not one of symmetry, but rather, one that breaks symmetry – and yet within, there is a beauty bursting into the world with a cry of pain that shatters all the canons of art, that dwarfs mere aestheticism and replaces it with the beauty of God made man.”

**Wonder and Christology**

If Christ (the “form”) is at the heart of Balthasar’s aesthetics, it becomes clear that ontological wonder must yield to Christic love. It subsequently becomes clear why the central theme of Balthasar’s metaphysics is openness—an opening to Being itself which is simultaneously an openness to glory and love. It models itself after “the way in which Jesus Christ lives in openness towards the Father and in this openness shows both the supreme exposure of the love of God and the supreme decision of man for God.” Here the Greek language of being broken open by beauty and “held out” against the backdrop of the gods takes on a uniquely Christian shape. Christ is exposed both to the abyss (in his death and *descensus*) and, concurrently, to the infinite expanse of divine love. The Christian “decision”—the act of faith—is similarly a total opening to the light of Being and, through it, to the primal, radiant love of God. Following both the tradition

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77 Viladesau, “Theosis,” 186.
79 GL5, 656.
of Franciscans, like Bonaventure, in their dispossessive poverty, and Ignatian spirituality with its emphasis on *indiferencia*, Christian being-in-the-world is nothing less than the constant, wondrous “yielding of the self... to the unfathomability of divine love.”

The choice to be a Christian, then, regardless of whether it is rationally defensible, means taking an ontological stance: "Confronted with this situation, we can find help only by radically inverting the way we pose the question: namely, by turning back from the question of the Last Thing—the purpose of human existence—to the question of the First Thing: to what is apparently the most obvious, the most unquestioned of all things: sheer existence." Theology ought to grapple with Being rather than, as in the contemporary scene, becoming forgetful of it. Balthasar suggests that if the “bond” between metaphysics and theology has been “dissolved,” the Christian is faced with two options. Firstly, to “let this tradition go on its own way” into dissipation; or the harder task of “sighting the obscured and lost beauty”—which, for Balthasar, begins with “naked glory” and continues with the distinctly “unmodern” emphasis on the indissolubility of *form*.

**Metaphysics and Art**

To sum up, for Balthasar the central theological task, “to treat of the glory of the

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80 *GL5*, 22.
81 *Epilogue*, 45.
82 *GL5*, 35-37.
Christian revelation,” must by its very nature unfold in conversation with metaphysics, the science of what *is* both in terms of its origin (“holy knowledge about the origins of the world”) and in the language of transcendental beauty, truth, and goodness. Yet as we have seen, for Balthasar “anyone who speaks of mythical-religious interpretation of being speaks also of *art* in its most original act of generation,” for “all great art is religious, an act of homage before the glory of what exists.”83 Here narrow, individualistic aesthetics are overturned in the process of recovering a revelatory “transcendental aesthetics” where theology and metaphysics – art and ontology – are deeply intertwined. Art comes out of the open wound in the heart of Being

In order to better understand Balthasar’s metaphysical understanding of art, it is worth considering the rest of his genealogy of glory. The fifth volume of *The Glory of the Lord* traces the development of a relationship between theology, art, and Being through the medieval period into the advent of the modern. For Balthasar, the tragedy of the Middle Ages (following Duns Scotus) is the widening of the “yawning gulf” between *le Dieu des philosophes* and God as revealed in the Bible. By assigning philosophy to a “neutral” sphere, and treating Being in itself in contrast to divine freedom, a Christian theology of glory “is deprived of the medium by means of which it could have been manifested” precisely at the historical moment it was poised to do so.84 Balthasar resists conceiving of philosophy as neutral territory, instead conceiving of it as a surface always related to the theological. For him, the Scholastic approach drives too great of a wedge between

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84 GL5, 18.
divine love and Being *qua* Being, making inadequate space for God’s self-revelation as precisely the measure and *fons et origo* of metaphysics.

As we have already seen, the genealogy of art and beauty which Balthasar poses is a redaction of Hegel’s view. Hegel’s emphasis was on the passage from the mythical to the Classic and finally to the philosophical purity anticipated in Romanticism. Balthasar follows the outlines of Hegel’s account here, but adds a more orthodox theological interpretation. When the religious fades from view, as happened near the close of the eighteenth century, the beautiful loses its “summit of glory” and becomes, in Goethe’s phrase, a process of “copying and repeating.” A Greek statue of Apollo, for example, is produced not as an autonomous aesthetic object, but in a mythical-philosophical-religious framework oriented toward the glorious beauty of being. As Goethe suggests, this type of artmaking, a “matter of faith,” is cut off from us now. The forms can be copied; the motivation behind them cannot. The beautiful cannot be “absolutized” as glory without this “summit”—such would be, according to Balthasar, “diabolical and melancholy.”

Balthasar thus turns to the history of art, theology, and philosophy in order to effect an ontological *ressourcement*. The “Neoscholastic closed circle” which dates back at least as far as Scotus “invites us to bypass the philosophical mystery of Being” and so also to

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85 *GL4*, 13.
lose sight of theological mystery. Balthasar explains:

In Neoscholasticism, when the feeling for the glory of God was lost—that glory which pervades the Revelation as a whole but which is not perceived by conceptual rationalism, or concerning which it remains silent, or which it wholly removes by way of method—there perished also the sensorium for the glory of Creation (as ‘aesthetics’) which shone through the whole theology of the Fathers and of the Early and High Middle Ages. This sensorium passed pre-eminently to the poets and artists (from Dante to Petrarch, to Milton, Herder, Hölderlin, Keats...), but also to the great natural scientists (such as Kepler and Newton, the early Kant, Goethe ...)

For Balthasar, a figure like the heretic astronomer Giordano Bruno is thus at times closer to the sense of glory than scholastic theology, for it is scientists, artists, and poets who are the lovers of Being. “The unfathomable ground of all things, which manifests itself in nature, the fathomable ground, corresponds, for Bruno, to nothing else than the intoxicating experience of the bottomless height, depth and glory of Being.”

The patristic figures who so shaped Balthasar (Irenaeus, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa) as well as medieval theologians like Bonaventure, Richard of St. Victor, and Aquinas himself all wrote theology palpably conscious of the beauty and wonder of God and creation. The loss of this “aesthetics” in the Neoscholastic period is, for Balthasar, devastating for Catholic theology. Theological aesthetics must begin with wonder—that there is something rather than nothing, because God has revealed his

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86 GL5, 26.
87 Ibid., 27.
88 GL4, 261.
love in the cosmos—and thus may benefit from art which calls it back to this primal amazement. Richard Viladesau expresses this well:

Art may also have a more or less explicitly ontological content. It may convey a message and/or evoke a metaphysical dimension of existence that constitutes a “revelation” of the divine self-communication, at least as the horizon of the experience: in the artistic evocation, for example, of inchoate desire, or joy, or longing, or wonder.  

Meister Eckhart

Balthasar’s genealogy of glory through art and philosophy continues into what can (very) loosely be called the modern period. Here Francesco Suarez (the progenitor of what Balthasar termed a “sawdust Thomism”), following in the footsteps of Duns Scotus, exemplifies one thread of philosophical metaphysics which holds to a “logical and conceptual apprehension of Being.” For Balthasar, Suarez eschews a Cusan, analogical approach to theology in favour of a univocal approach to Being, in concert (for Balthasar, following Gustav Siewerth) with Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. A second historical thread instead identifies Being with God, though adopting a radically apophatic method. This stream is typified for Balthasar by the great German mystic Meister Eckhart. This is the thread of the mystics and saints (Tauler, Suso, the author of the *Theologia Germanica*, Ruysbroeck) and is, for Balthasar, the richer approach though

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89 Viladesau, 153.
90 *GL5*, 29.
91 Ibid., 22.
it is fraught with contradictions. Balthasar reminds us that Eckhart, in ascribing Being to God, does this as an act of religious devotion.\(^\text{92}\)

Thus rather than being a philosopher or alchemist twisting theological terms to serve his own ends, Eckhart’s mystical concept of Gelassenheit or letting-go (unlike Heidegger’s use of the same term) issues from a deep sense of divine love. Balthasar is particularly interested in Eckhart’s doctrine of divine “whylessness,” which can be perceived in the “fontal character (fontalitas) of being, the fact that it is unceasingly occurring and disclosing itself.”\(^\text{93}\) This for Eckhart finds its pattern in the eternal generation (semper nascitur) of the Son from the Father. Openness is thus given a properly theological name. Human response to this fontal disclosure of Being is Eckhart’s “universal receptivity,” Gelassenheit,\(^\text{94}\) which for Balthasar also finds Trinitarian completion in the receptivity of the Marian womb to the eternal begetting of the Son.

Eckhart emphasizes this fundamental openness in terms simultaneously theological, ontological, and mystical. Receptivity, in Eckhart’s thought, is so strongly emphasized that in a sense Being is nothing, or non-Being; God, in turn, becomes pure potentiality, an event of self-giving.\(^\text{95}\) The dangers here are, for Balthasar, obvious: If the creature is nothing, we are on the way to Luther; if the point of contact between God and creature becomes the reality of God (God as “becoming”) we are on the way to Hegel, Heidegger, Heidegger, Heidegger, Heidegger.

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 30-31.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., 32.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 36.
\(^{95}\) Ibid., 42-44.
and Whitehead-inspired process theology. For Balthasar, Nicholas of Cusa is thus a helpful thinker in that he moves beyond Eckhart’s quasi-pantheism (God-the-all, and God-as-Non-Being, which can easily revert to “man-the-all and God-the-nothing”) towards a better understanding of the analogical nature of metaphysical knowledge. For Cusa, God is the *non-aliud*. This is an apophatic formulation which enables a keen sense of the beauty and glory manifested in creation, and thus makes a space for both apophatic (non-being) and cataphatic (being) theological responses. For Cusa, being is theophanic, shining forth the glory of the Father without collapsing into identity.  

Another theme Balthasar picks up on enthusiastically is the feminine nature of *Gelassenheit* – “handmaidenly” and, eventually, “bridal” receptivity to God. Historically speaking, “the entry of the idea of abandonment into the realm of transcendence becomes the occasion for women to express themselves in a Church that thinks of itself as womanly.”  

[“Of course,” Balthasar notes somewhat condescendingly, “occasionally, the sensibility slips down from its metaphysical sublimity to the level of the . and erotic.”]  

This, for Balthasar, is an important and enduring aspect of Eckhart’s thought.

**Theological Anthropology**

The Reformation called into question the credibility of the Church, and thus also its “role

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96 Ibid., 228-229.
97 Ibid., 80.
98 Ibid., 80.
as mediatrix of divine glory.”

What was called for then, particularly in the Renaissance, was a new “mediation of antiquity”—a rediscovering “the divine glory in the beauty of the cosmos” (e.g. Dante and Petrarch drawing on Plotinian themes) as if seeing it afresh—and then a rediscovery of Christ as synthesis of revelation in the cosmos.

In the same period, however, man (the “I”) is in the ascendant, and so a sense for glory becomes linked to humanism. Balthasar rejects Renaissance humanism in favour of what Scola terms a “meta-anthropology” of the human person:

> Man is thus the point of departure of meta-anthropology; but if I pose the question of the ontological difference in terms of man I must first recognize that man exists only in dialogue with his fellow man. The horizon of infinite Being in its totality opens to him in dialogue. And in dialogue, correlatively, man gains self-awareness.

Man cannot be the measure of man. Rather, Balthasar’s theological anthropology begins with a kind of meta-dialogical encounter—a total openness to Being. Human being is not totalized, but rather finds its meaning in relation to the infinite manifestation of Being. [By “dialogue” Balthasar also means symphonic and plural—like the four Gospels, each distinct but all contributing to the total picture, so all existence is to be intersubjective.]

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99 Ibid., 206.
100 Ibid., 207.
101 Scola, 24-25.
102 See GL1, 650.
103 GL5, 23.
Yet this is only the beginning. Meta-anthropology means humanity is not only measured by Being, but by God. “What man is before God” is the true determinant of the nature of the world—and so again, the Greek figure “held out into the nothingness” is transposed into Christian terms. God’s judgment, as evinced in the Old Testament, is the background here. But in light of the New Testament, the “measuring” of man must be conceived of christologically—both in the sense of Christ as the one held out into the abyss, and (as in Bonaventure’s exemplarism, or even that of Jonathan Edwards) as the measure and prototype for all things.

The Holy Fool

For Balthasar it is not only theology and mysticism that keep alive the sensorium for glory. Another key aspect of the search for Wisdom culminates in the figure of the holy fool in art and literature—“here a vital gleam of Christian faith becomes perceptible in the world of art.” Balthasar cites Wolfram’s *Parzival* (pp. 152-164); Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (169-180); and Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* as examples of the christological holy fool, the simpleton who typifies the kingdom of heaven. When philosophy fails, it is the figure of the “fool” which preserves the “form” of Christ. Thus finally, at the end of Balthasar’s genealogy appears a lone painter: the Catholic expressionist Georges Rouault. In Balthasar’s estimation, Rouault’s clowns, even more so than his religious paintings, invoke the holy fool who like St Francis humiliates

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104 *GL1*, 648.  
105 *GL5*, 81.
himself, becoming a spectacle for the cosmos (1 Cor. 4:9)—a figure of Christ crucified. Apart from Michelangelo, Georges Rouault is the one visual artist whose work Balthasar discusses at length in his theological aesthetics. For Balthasar, Rouault can be found at the end of the tradition of the “holy fool,” a figure of the “metaphysic of foolish reason” in contrast to the wisdom of this world.\textsuperscript{106} Rouault is significant for art history because he moves from trying to “represent Christian things in the language of beauty” to smashing “the canonical form,” suggesting with his brushstrokes that “it is in the clown that the most open image of human existence is to be found.”\textsuperscript{107} Here it is interesting to consider the similarity of Balthasar’s art-criticism with that of Paul Tillich, whose overall assessment of Rouault is that his explicitly religious paintings (of Christ, Mary, the disciples) are less compelling than when his expressive style is turned to non-religious content. For Tillich, Rouault much like the German Expressionist Emil Nolde suffers from the “inwardly broken relation of contemporary artists to the symbols of the religious tradition,”\textsuperscript{108} where the “old symbols”\textsuperscript{109} have lost their meaning. For both Balthasar and Tillich, then, paintings such as “Head of a Tragic Clown” (1904) are thus just as theologically rich as more explicitly religious works like “Christ With The Crown of Thorns” (1905), which presents a face of Christ which in its disfigurement and expressionistic brushstrokes appears almost clownlike. “It takes the eye of faith to see in Christ the humiliation and offending of eternal love and in one’s disfigured fellow

\begin{footnotes}
\item[106] Ibid., 205.
\item[107] Ibid., 201-202.
\end{footnotes}
human beings the glimmer of the grace of Christ."\textsuperscript{110} Rouault accomplishes this sublime glimmering “by hitherto unknown methods of painting,” by luminosity, movement, and the shattering of form – a kind of kenotic practice. Balthasar thus attributes to Rouault a style of painting which reveals glory “more immanent and at the same time more transcendent.”\textsuperscript{111}

Apart from Rouault, however, the last hundred years or so of art history fare poorly in Balthasar’s estimation, displaying—“with the exception of French painting,” particularly Poussin and Watteau—“an unimaginable lack of taste.”\textsuperscript{112} Balthasar is unenthused about the “deification of the artist” common in modern art, as well as (in what seems to at least be a partial response to his own political context) the deficiencies of art centred on “homeland protection” (\textit{Heimatschutz}).\textsuperscript{113} He thus doubly resists the abstract art of the twentieth century, a devolution he ultimately traces back to Kant: “Abstract figurations present themselves in the nothingness. The forms of the tradition have lost the background against which they could be understood and now give the impression of something in a museum.”\textsuperscript{114} Here again there are echoes of Hegel, who though he espoused a theory of the “end” of art when the idea came into the ascendant still linked the artwork with the particular and concrete. Balthasar’s comments seem to belie a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{110} \textit{GL5}, 203.
  \item \textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 203.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 597.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} What is questionable is why Balthasar is critical of such “deification” in the modern period, while he continues to look to older examples of musical or literary genius in roughly analogous terms.
  \item \textsuperscript{114} \textit{GL4}, 35.
\end{itemize}
strikingly pessimistic assessment of contemporary art, implying at first blush both a 
Eurocentrism and a classicism out of step with even the most staid current thinkers in 
the field of theology and the arts. However, like Heidegger, Balthasar’s polemic against 
contemporary art (by which he has in mind almost exclusively European sources) is not 
directed so much at symptomatic individual artists but at the larger impact of a certain 
rogue strain of Kantian aesthetics, which by being forgetful of Being reduces art to mere 
aestheticism. Balthasar is no proponent of “l’art pour l’art,” or art as ‘useless’ as in Paul 
Valery’s famous quote, and sees certain trends in twentieth-century European art as 
contributing to cultural amnesia. Rather, great art for Balthasar can re-awaken 
reverence for Being—a kind of anamnesis—and from there go on to revivify culture in 
terms of beauty, truth, and goodness.

Conclusion

As has been stated, Balthasar does not directly offer a theology of art outright, but 
rather a theology of form—a theological ontology (in unfashionable language, a 
“metaphysics”) emerging out of a phenomenology of beauty, truth, and goodness—with 
the potential to nourish a rich theological engagement with the arts. A Balthasarian 
understanding of aesthetic experience has the distinct benefit of connecting the

115 Anne Carpenter has written more extensively of Balthasar’s attitudes toward 
specific art movements – including the “crisis” in European art represented by Dada and 
Surrealism. See Carpenter, 28. She cites several articles as providing a cross-section of 
Balthasar’s evolving views on visual art both inside and outside of the church – including 
“Die Kunst in der Zeit,” Schweizerische Rundschau 40 (1940): 239-246 and the earlier 
experience the subject has of “truth” and “beauty” in a “form” such as the artwork to
the ultimate (i.e., “objective”) horizon against which the work of art discloses these
qualities, namely, the horizon of Being. For Balthasar, the great work of art is not just an
ornament that pleases the senses and affections, but rather irrupts from the
immeasurable depths of Being, radiating the transcendentals of Beauty, Truth, and
Goodness—considered, of course, in relation to the all-encompassing backdrop of the
divine. The key word in his approach is thus Being. For Balthasar, form (including artistic
form) is the vehicle of the “manifestation and bestowal” of Being. The appearance of
the form always reveals “more,” an “excess” of perception—it is an inexhaustible
conduit of Being, with possibilities that can never be exhausted: every created form “is
always ‘more’ than what is projected on to the surface, and this mysterious More can
also be read in a mysterious manner from that surface.” The hermeneutical task of
interpreting and understanding aesthetic form involves, at its core, a wager on ontology
—one on Being. “Along with the seen surface of the manifestation [of the form] there is
perceived the non-manifested depth: it is only this which lends the phenomenon of the
beautiful its enrapturing and overwhelming character, just as it is only this that insures
the truth and goodness of the existent. This holds both for the beauty of nature and the
beauty of art.” To emphasize the phenomenal is of critical importance; but as we saw
in the previous chapter to follow a certain tradition of post-Kantian phenomenology in
replacing the classical conception of Being with a realm of unknowable noumena is

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116 GL1, 118.
117 GL5, 622.
118 GL1, 442.
disastrous. Rather, the appearance itself reveals (in a pattern of veiling and unveiling) the unfathomable depths of Being. A philosophical aesthetics must yield to a “renewed phenomenology,” which must in turn yield to the eyes of faith. Art history thus becomes, for Balthasar, a means of tracing the lineaments of metaphysics.

Balthasar’s quest for the origin of the work of art is thus an ontological one. From what depths do beauty, truth, and freedom spring? What does it mean to say the work of art—as a unique and determinate “form”—discloses Being? As Balthasar writes of artists, “whoever grasps the beautiful in an original manner is directed to a point of the origin of Being, and is caught up close to it.”119 To simply understand art in terms of an “inner-worldly” aesthetic is deeply inadequate. As a quest for an ontological point of origin, which for Balthasar opens up onto theological and specifically Trinitarian vistas, the method must be both phenomenological and genealogical, a tracing back as well as a deepening in the present. Thus it makes perfect sense that the defining feature of Balthasar’s aesthetic is its archaeological impulse, the way it careens through the history of metaphysics paying equal heed to theologians and poets, philosophers and painters, mystics and dramatists. Balthasar enters into dialogue with the great voices of the past not simply to catalogue a comprehensive history of ideas, but in order to uncover or unveil the hidden sensorium for glory. This is why the voices of the poets—supremely Hölderlin, Rilke, and Hopkins—are included alongside those of the philosophers, for they are closer to this palpable (Greek) “sense” of the glory of Being.

119 GL5, 605.
For Balthasar, an ontological approach to art—one that recognizes “appearance” *(phainesthai)* as the manifestation of the depths of Being, and takes wonder as a first principle for aesthetics—must thus ultimately be complemented by a theological perspective, integrating a (Heideggerian) vision of Being as givenness and event into a (Thomistic) account of the Truth, Goodness, and Beauty which irradiate Being from their divine source. As opposed to Heidegger, as well as to Protestant theologians such as Barth and Nebel, Balthasar recasts “the event of the beautiful”—the ontological event whereby humanity is “broken open” to the gods in the presence of artistic beauty—as a foreshadowing of the fullness of metaphysics introduced in Christian theology, specifically the *analogia entis*. Christ is, for Balthasar, the analogy of Being in human form. Metaphysics thus ultimately finds its vocabulary only in reference to this theophanic event of God’s self-giving as love.

One of Balthasar’s theses throughout the theological aesthetics, which was outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, is that “even in the realm of worldly beauty, form cannot really be perceived without the beholder being taken up into it.”¹²⁰ Likewise, the ultimate form of Christ “take[s] up” the subject into an encounter. Balthasar thus refuses to sever the link between phenomenology and theology, casting Christianity as "theological light," *maximum* and *ultimum* that sheds light on art (cultural forms) and being.¹²¹ "This retrospectively cast light lets us see peculiarities of Being" which in turn illuminates

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¹²⁰ *GL1*, 600.
¹²¹ *Epilogue*, 45.
phenomena in their distinctiveness, including works of art. As we shall see in the next chapter on Heidegger’s contribution, this thus engenders a new way of seeing where one is “taken up” by wonder: seeing the form "happens in wonderment: man is astonished that the whole of Being has been opened up to him, to the very one who knows himself to be only a fragment." Broken open by beauty, the human person is drawn to the aesthetic form and even so is eschatologically oriented toward Christ, the form of forms. For Balthasar, then, to answer Heidegger’s question, “the ‘origin’ or starting point for his dialogue was Jesus Christ,” not the world of the arts in which he was immersed and from which he drew his theological vocabulary. As we shall see in the following chapter, his reading of Heidegger continues this theme.

\[\text{122} \text{ Ibid., 48.}\]
IV: The Fugitive Gods : Balthasar and Heidegger

We modern men presumably have not the slightest notion how thoughtfully the Greeks experienced their lofty poetry, their works of art—no, not experience, but let them stand there in the presence of their radiant appearance... This truth is called beauty. Beauty is a fateful gift of the essence of truth, and here truth means the disclosure of what keeps itself concealed. The beautiful is not what pleases, but what falls within that fateful gift of truth which comes to be when that which is eternally non-apparent and therefore invisible attains its most radiantly apparent appearance.¹

Martin Heidegger, “What is Called Thinking?”

To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods.²

Heidegger, “Poetry, Language, Thought”

Introduction

Unlike Balthasar’s theo-aesthetics, which though of increasing importance in the theological realm have not been prominent in secular art theory and aesthetics, Martin Heidegger’s writings on art, particularly his seminal essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (Der Ursprung des Kunstwerk), have exerted considerable influence on contemporary art and theory with its insistence on the primordial, elemental power of art’s “truth.”³ Gianni Vattimo, best known for his postulation of a wholly secularized

2 Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, 94.
Christianity “after the death of God,” has suggested that Heidegger’s radical phenomenology of art played out not only in philosophy but in the avant-garde art movements of the twentieth century—Surrealism, Dada, the Duchampian readymade, and so on. These artists posed by the very gesture of setting out their radically transgressive artworks the fundamental question: what is art, ontologically speaking? What kind of “truth” does it disclose? Following Heidegger, Vattimo describes “truth” as the goal of art’s unique “ontological bearing,” an orientation that “issues in projects of transformation.” Twentieth-century art history can thus be seen as a forum in which the Heideggerian question of art’s “truth” has been repeatedly posed, through modernism to postmodernism and into the "contemporary" landscape—a problem that can only be properly interrogated, according to Heidegger, ontologically, with respect to the veiling and unveiling of Being.

The previous chapter began by discussing the ontological problem of the “origin of the work of art” in Balthasarian perspective. In so doing, I aimed to describe and point to the enduring value of Balthasar’s metaphysical approach to art and revelation. This chapter focuses in particular on the relationship of Balthasar’s philosophical/theological method to that of the postmetaphysical thinker Martin Heidegger, both in terms of the nature of the work of art and their approach to a doctrine of Being. In “The Origin of the

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5 Ibid., xxi-xxii.
Work of Art,” Heidegger locates art’s origin not just in the productive activity of the artist, but in the process by which “the artwork opens up, in its own way, the being of beings.” Thus for Heidegger, the origin of the work of art is truth; the artist brings forth truth, making it manifest in the tensions between what he calls “the open” or the “clearing” and its simultaneous, inevitable concealment. Art unearths truth; artistic creation summons the elemental, truthful (aletheia) power of Being. Balthasar, much like Heidegger, describes the artist as one who “grasps the beautiful in an original manner” and so is “directed to a point of the origin of Being, and is caught up close to it.” Art thus originates for both thinkers in the mysterious heart of Being, and moreover in the “wound” which attends human encounter with the infinite.

There are sections of Balthasar’s work where he sounds almost exactly like Heidegger speaking of the disclosure of Being and the veiledness of truth, just as in Heidegger there are passages which would easily fit in Balthasar’s aesthetics. One such example is the first quote from Heidegger at the opening of this chapter, which reminds us that both thinkers are (perhaps surprisingly) deeply concerned with beauty, radiance, and above all truth in the form of veiled unveiling, aletheia. For Balthasar and Heidegger alike, the work of art originates in wonder at the heart of Being—in the self-

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6 “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Poetry, Language, Thought, 18. “Precisely in great art... the artist remains something inconsequential in comparison with the work – almost like a passageway which, in the creative process, destroys itself for the sake of the coming forth of the work.”

7 GL5, 605.

8 As we shall see, Balthasar also explores truth as emeth (the Hebraic paradigm) or faithfulness.
manifestation of Being, what Balthasar famously terms “the manifestation of the unmanifest”—not just in the subjective activity of the individual artist. However, Balthasar criticizes Heidegger, in his departure from Christian theology, for leaving insufficient space for this primal wonder. For Balthasar, a renewed (theological) aesthetics must be both ontological, concerned from front to back with Being, and theological, considering Being not as coterminous with the divine but as itself the “revealed and revealing light” which floods the essential human “wonder that there is anything at all rather than nothing.”9 Here Being is not considered as identical to God, which would (as Heidegger suggests) be ontotheology, but as a medium through which the divine light shines. The origin of the work of art, for Balthasar, is thus ultimately construed in not only broadly theological, but specifically Christological, terms.

This chapter can thus be seen as an expansion of the previous one, which began by exploring Balthasar’s relation of art to the question of Being by first of all revisiting his retrieval of Greek metaphysics. As we shall see, Balthasar’s reading of the Greeks is deeply influenced by Heidegger. In what follows I will outline Heidegger’s own account of art and ontology as a lens through which to read Balthasar: firstly, the “early” Heidegger’s phenomenological method, and then the mystical-poetic approach adopted around the time of his seminal “The Origin of the Work of Art.” This then paves the way for consideration of the relationship between phenomenology and theology, a question

to which Balthasar and Heidegger naturally provide different answers. This finally enables consideration of why a “theological aesthetics” predicated on a “comprehensive doctrine of Being” is of lasting value to theological conversations about art, beauty, and the divine.

Revisiting Art’s “Origin”

Before comparing Balthasar and Heidegger’s approaches to art’s origin, it is worth rehearsing Balthasar’s aims in contradistinction to Heidegger’s. In his famous and influential essay on “The Origin of the Work of Art,” the controversial German philosopher defines origin as “that from where and through which a thing is what it is and how it is.”

10 This immediately leads him, however, into a circular discussion. “The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist.” The prima facie sense of this paradox is that it is a dead end, and that we must look for a third agent to define the origin of the artwork. Yet as Heidegger comes to point out, “we must move in a circle” in order to arrive at the “truth” of the artwork—in fact, the “path” or “steps” from “art” to “work” to “artist” are circles within the hermeneutical circle. 11 The “origin” of the work of art conceals itself even as it is unveiled, but in beginning to ask this question we are going in a fruitful direction.

In the following discussion, I hope to avoid unnecessary circling. Yet in order to

11 Ibid., 2.
investigate the “origin” of the work of art in Balthasar’s thought in conversation with Heidegger, some encircling may be necessary. Heidegger provides throughout his work the image of the Holzwege or forest path. These are, in the forests of Bavaria, paths well-known by locals which wend through the trees to good hunting grounds or places to gather firewood. Sometimes the paths double back on themselves; sometimes they come abruptly to an end. Often the paths lead to a “clearing” (Dickung). In these spaces deep within the forest, the density of trees is interrupted, and “light can stream into the clearing, into its openness, and let brightness play with darkness in it.”

This “openness,” the interplay of light and darkness, and the circuitous path by which one reaches the clearing are for Heidegger pregnant metaphors for the task of thinking. “Opening,” such as one finds in the clearing, is for Heidegger a “primal phenomenon” (Urphänomen), a Goethean term. The “free space of the opening” where light can stream through is what makes possible truth as “unconcealment,” for which Heidegger adopts the Greek term a-letheia (unforgetting)—this is “truth” not just as adequatio or correlation but truth as the opening of Being. Thinking is thus a kind of opening to the disclosures of Being, a receptivity which the later Heidegger even compares to a kind of “piety” or “thanking.”

In our quest for the “origin” of the work of art, Balthasar and Heidegger take similar winding paths with different endpoints. For Balthasar, the Urphänomen is, employing

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13 Ibid., 385.
14 See WICT, 138-139.
another Goethean term, “form” (*Gestalt*). The form is where *aletheia* (truth) happens, in a pattern of veiling and unveiling which cannot be reduced to the simple dichotomy of “subject” and “object.” Form is in itself fundamentally characterized by openness—to the eye of the beholder, as well as to Being itself which manifests its inexhaustible “depths” in the form. However, as in Heidegger there is even in the act of unconcealment a movement of veiling or concealment, of hiddenness: for Balthasar, “the thing of beauty appears... with Being in its fullness,” yet even in this fullness the form “points to the origin that not only conceals itself in the form but also reveals itself in its hidden being,” the “ground and origin behind which we cannot go or investigate.”

Light streams through the trees, and creates networks of shadows on the forest floor, a kind of *chiaroscuro*. Balthasar thus speaks of Being not only as radiance, but as mystery. Those who walk the path must be ever “mindful” of Being, remaining constantly open to its appearance. Unlike Heidegger, however, Balthasar does not rest content with (re)tracing his steps back through the woods. Rather, Balthasar’s path, though winding, makes its way towards the horizon of the divine.

**The early Heidegger**

In order to understand Heidegger’s approach to art, it is necessary to explore his early studies, particularly as they grew out of Christian theology. Heidegger’s obsessive interest in the question of Being dates back to his early reading of a text by Franz

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15 This is from Balthasar’s summary of his aesthetics in the early part of TD II, 22.
Brentano on the multiple meanings of Being in Aristotle. His first move in *Being and Time* is to assert, along with the Christian theological tradition of Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa, the ontological difference between Being and beings. Being is not just a being, and so one cannot understand it stepwise, moving up the rungs of beings (*Seindes*) towards an apex. Rather, the “formulation of the question” of Being is difficult. For Heidegger, “we are always already involved in an understanding of Being,” with the act of being-in-the-world characterized by a fundamentally hermeneutical posture - determining and interpreting one’s own bearing in relation to being as such. Thus the question turns back upon beings—beings are what is “interrogated” or summoned by Being, not the other way around. Human existence, which Heidegger creatively re-terms *Dasein* or “being-there,” is thus an *ek*-sistence, a “standing out” from Being. Like Balthasar, Heidegger identifies the paradigmatic form of this standing out from Being in the tragic mythology of the Greeks, who grasped the tenuous and largely tragic situation of man in the presence of the gods. Held out into the nothing, naked before the gods, *Dasein* must articulate its concerns in light of this fundamental situation, particularly the most basic reality of death and mortality. The existence of *Dasein*, “thrown” (*Geworfen*) into a situation where authentic and courageous “being towards death” is the only suitable response, must always be considered in relation to Being—not the ontic realm of specific sciences and ways of knowing, but the fundamental ontological “thrownness”

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17 *Being and Time* in *Basic Writings*, 45-46.
18 Ibid., 47.
(Geworfen, which carries over the sense of fate from the Greeks) in which all interpretation of existence must occur.

A truly “fundamental ontology” is thus only possible through what the Heidegger of Being and Time terms an “existential analytic.” Certainly, for Heidegger, there are ways of knowing and interpreting which reveal various areas of truth about the world in different ways — he terms these existentiell modes of interpretation and being-in-the-world. However, these rarely penetrate to the level of the existential—which is to say, hermeneutics “mindful” of Being. Heidegger is often thought of as an existentialist, but he vehemently rejected any connection to the concerns of his French contemporaries. For Jean-Paul Sartre, with his rallying-cry of “existence precedes essence,” Heidegger’s existential project signaled a new horizon for humanism—an anthropology with self-determining (political) existence, rather than an abstract essence at its core. Yet, in his Letter on Humanism, Heidegger rejects Sartre’s existential approach as missing the point of Dasein; Heidegger’s interest is not in the self-making of man, but in Dasein’s basic relation to Being qua Being.¹⁹ Humanity does not create or project Being, but rather dwells within it. Here Balthasar and Heidegger are in harmony, for Balthasar is also interested in raising the horizon from the transcendental potential of the human (perhaps what Przywara calls the “meta-ontic”) to the (theological) light streaming through Being as the ultimate measure (the “meta-noetic”).²⁰

¹⁹ Scott, 151-152.
²⁰ See Przywara, Analogia Entis.
If this is *Dasein’s* experience of Being, what then can be said of Being itself? For Heidegger, Being is elusive, mysterious, even “lizardlike” in the way it constantly slips out of view.²¹ Heidegger’s seminal essay “What is Metaphysics?” approaches this central question in a roundabout, even paradoxical, way. He begins by characterizing the (ontic) sciences, in their concern with what can be verified and theorized, as adhering to a strict code: “What should be examined are beings only, and besides that—nothing; beings alone, and further—nothing.”²² Yet, Heidegger asks provocatively, what is the “nothing” excluded by science? It is, as he puts it, “the complete negation of the totality of beings.”²³ How can one then know or speak about this excluded “nothing,” and, eventually, of Being? Heidegger provocatively suggests that *Dasein* comes to sense the nothing in particular “moods” and “feelings.” In “profound boredom,” for instance, or love, *Dasein* can be drawn into an “attunement” (*Stimmung*) within which beings are discernable as a whole (a miserable grey whole, in the case of boredom), an intimation of the “nothing.” However, it is only in the fundamental (and Kierkegaardian) mood of anxiety (*Angst*) that the nothing is revealed, and so in the light of nothing “all things and we ourselves sink into indifference.”²⁴ Thus in becoming “ill at ease” with the world of beings, “nothing” is disclosed. As Balthasar puts it in his gloss on Heidegger, human *Dasein* is for the German thinker to be found in “the extreme perplexity, the anxiety in which all existence slips away, in order to open up access to the question of Being.”²⁵

²¹ Scott, 155.
²² Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings*, 97.
²³ Ibid., 100.
²⁴ Ibid., 103.
²⁵ GL5, 432.
This model of *Dasein* in isolation from the rest of his *oeuvre* does not seem to leave sufficient space for art and the aesthetic, much less for Christian metaphysics, in Heidegger’s thought. Balthasar’s fondness for Heidegger thus initially seems misplaced—what is to separate his thought from a kind of aesthetic nihilism? However, for Heidegger the nothing (*das Nichts*) does not come as an object. Rather, it is the precondition—in the form of “nihilation,” the “repelling gesture” whereby *Dasein* “shrink[s] back] before already-retreating beings—for beings to come to light. Thus we move from nothingness to the aesthetic appearance: “In the clear light of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises... Only on the ground of the original revelation of the nothing can human existence approach and penetrate beings.”

Nothingness is the darkness which encircles *Dasein*, that into which we are "thrown"—it is both the fundamental "existential datum" and in a certain way the ultimate subject of philosophy. "*Da-sein* means: being held out into the nothing." This being held out (*ek-stasis*) into the nothing is however, for Heidegger, transcendence. As the Balthasarian scholar Aidan Nichols points out, for Heidegger “being-in-the-world” is not the opposite of transcendence, but what makes it possible—he describes a paradoxically immanent, “earthly” transcendence stemming from human

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26 Ibid., 105.
27 Scott, 149.
28 Ibid.
temporality.\textsuperscript{29} This is a transcendence always-already “shot through” with 
\textit{das Nichts}—in fact, where Being’s own “penetration” by nothingness is its only source of “illumination.”\textsuperscript{30}

Existentially and ethically, then, Heideggerian transcendence emerges from \textit{Angst}—within the context of the temporal “being towards death” which characterizes human \textit{Dasein}.\textsuperscript{31} Being is only knowable through nothingness, a formulation which seems so radically apophatic as to be obscure.\textsuperscript{32} However, the question here, as Nichols points out, is whether this is to be taken as a “metaphysic” or a “phenomenological description.”\textsuperscript{33} “Only because Nothing is revealed in the very basis of our Dasein ... is it possible for the utter strangeness of what-is to dawn on us.”\textsuperscript{34} A certain unimpeded “ontological shock” at death and nothingness is what animates the central task of \textit{Dasein}, to interpret Being. Yet as Nathan O. Scott writes, for Heidegger the experience of nothingness does not simply equate to “the purest sort of nihilism” (nothingness as a doctrine of Being) but a "propaedeutic" towards a richer ontology. Being may not be a \textit{positum}—it still demands a deeply apophatic approach—but Heidegger’s thought cannot be so easily reduced to a simple nihilism. Nihilism is rather an “event” within his


\textsuperscript{30} Nichols, \textit{Scattering the Seed}, 205-206.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 210-212.

\textsuperscript{32} It is worth mentioning Heidegger’s interest in Eastern philosophy.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 212.

\textsuperscript{34} Scott, 150.
thinking of Being.\textsuperscript{35}

A second important aspect of Heidegger’s philosophical method for understanding his influence on Balthasar and the arts is his relationship to phenomenology. The so-called “onto-theological” model prevalent in Western metaphysics implies that all objects are “made” by the gods (or the Christian God as \textit{causa sui}) and thus designed for a use or purpose. For Heidegger, this “aesthetic” presupposition or projection of “purpose”—which in turn reinforces a static, inflexible “metaphysics of presence”—can obscure the “undisguised presence” of the thing—its true essence, which lies in its becoming rather than some function or use-value assigned to it. Heidegger instead advocates yielding oneself to a thing “as it is in its own being”—to its self-disclosure in \textit{aisthesis}.\textsuperscript{36}

Following the phenomenological tradition begun by Husserl, the accent here is placed on the “appearance” of the thing, on its self-showing—letting it be, just as it is and presents itself to the senses—regardless of its ontic status. However, departing somewhat from the first principles of phenomenology, one of the first things Heidegger notices about the self-showing of the thing is that it presupposes Being. Our senses are attuned to pick up not only the individual qualities of something, such as colour and taste, but an \textit{a priori} “more” or “excess,” which is precisely the fact of something’s being; this is what enables us to then see it, hear it, interpret it and so on:

\begin{quote}
That the blue sky ‘blues,’ that it is in blueness, that the lark which sings is in
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{36} Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art.”
singing: all this remains so obvious that we do not give it any further notice...
Precisely when we are lying in the meadow and thinking of nothing else do we
perceive this ‘excess,’ i.e. these several beings, the one and the other, and each
itself the same.  

Though he attempts to ‘destroy’ a certain concept of physis (being), the whole purpose
of phenomenology is for Heidegger not simply the Husserlian bracketing out of Being in
order to concentrate on the appearance, but rather to substantiate philosophy’s claim
to be the “science of being”—i.e. ontology, the answer to the essential and vital
philosophical question “why is there something rather than nothing?”—a question to
which Balthasar’s answer, as we shall see, is love.

Heidegger’s writings on art are often described as “anti-aesthetic” in their
deconstruction of philosophical aesthetics in search of a more elemental paradigm for
art and artmaking. For both Balthasar and Heidegger modern aesthetics is inadequate,
placing the emphasis on subjective taste, enjoyment, and pleasure rather than the
irruption of Beauty and Being in the artwork. In Heidegger’s language, it is forgetful or
oblivious (in the sense of “oblivion”) of Being (Seinsvergessenheit). Aesthetics fits into
an historical pattern of philosophy which is simultaneously a story of the forgetting of

39 Daigler, 376.
Being and the forgetfulness of that forgetfulness (“une histoire de l’oubli de l’être et de l’oubli de cet oubli,” as Pascal Ide writes).\textsuperscript{40}

One author thus suggests that what Heidegger essentially provides, at least in his early writings, is a kind of “phenomenology for the godforsaken”—an account of human knowing, including artistic knowledge, for a fallen humanity.\textsuperscript{41} Something must be said here about Heidegger’s rejection of the Catholicism of his youth (his father was rector of a church in Marburg) and subsequent Protestant formation. Indeed, the \textit{Destruktion} or dismantling of onto-theological metaphysics he calls for flows directly from Luther’s suspicion of theologies of glory. Yet Heidegger is not entirely dismissive of Western metaphysics. The “\textit{de-struktion}” he calls for is not an obliteration but a de-structuring, a “loosening of the sclerotic tradition and a dissolving of the concealments produced by it.”\textsuperscript{42} A more primordial, authentic account of Being is what Heidegger seeks to rehabilitate, the same ontology provided by the Greeks but “forgotten” by subsequent philosophy. Truth is a matter of “unforgetting” (Greek \textit{aletheia}) the history of the concealment of Being—even if this means passing through the nothing.

Heidegger is also often called a phenomenologist. Yet the lack of an ontological perspective spurred Heidegger to depart from the Husserlian tradition. For Heidegger,

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{40} Ide, 135.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} See T.J. McGrath, \textit{The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken} (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006).
  \item \textsuperscript{42} \textit{Basic Writings}, 67.
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the phenomenological project of his teacher was insufficient to grapple with the central philosophical question—the essence of Being. For Heidegger, phenomenology is only of use when conceived of as a science of Being, describing and investigating phenomena from an ontological, rather than ontic and superficial, position.

John Caputo describes three periods in Heidegger’s thought. The first is his conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism, culminating in Being and Time; the second, circa 1928, a movement towards a heroic, Promethean emphasis on struggle and strife (Kampf, with all its historical overtones). This is the period of Heidegger’s Nazi involvement, a disturbing reality made even more palpable with the recent publication of the Black Notebooks. Thirdly, however, Heidegger’s thought moves towards an almost zen-like form of mythopoetic meditation. Seen as a whole, his philosophy thus moves from strife and struggle—de-conversion and de-construction firstly away from Catholicism, and then away from Christianity altogether—to a greater sense of grace and gift, in the form of Gelassenheit, letting-be. ⁴³

The late Heidegger: The Origin of the Work of Art (1935)

For his part, Heidegger identified a Kehre or “turning” in his own thought in the mid-1930s, which has been described in terms of a movement from a more scientific, phenomenological approach to a mystical-poetic, meditative mode of thinking. The

⁴³ Caputo, 179.
Kehre also entails a movement from thinking of Being in terms of our experience as Dasein (human being-there) to a metaphysic of Being itself in all its mystery and openness.\(^4^4\) Being thus remained his primary concern, explicated in his later work not in terms of the scientifically formulated “existential analytic” of Being and Time but in the difficult and evocative language of the Ereignis or “propriation of the fourfold.”

Dissatisfied with traditional philosophical terms and concepts as beholden to an instrumentalizing form of reason, Heidegger drew on poetry and art as more elemental ways of expressing the truth of Being. Moreover, for Heidegger such an approach would resist the closure brought about by the “enframing” (Ge-stell) nature of the technological age, an onto-theological structure which suppressed creativity and engendered a deadly “forgetfulness” of Being. In such a closed system, a renewed openness must be pursued, and art and poetry are radical (and perhaps revolutionary) instances of such opening.

As we have already seen, when Heidegger writes of the “Origin of the Work of Art” in his essay of the same name he is not interested in describing a strictly historical point of origin but in investigating the question ontologically, with respect to Being. This “original” account does not mean erecting an ontology of art based on correspondence or a philosophical account of mimesis. Rather, this particular essay of Heidegger’s sits precisely at the point of the Kehre from the more scientific phenomenology of Being and Time and his early lectures towards a focus on the “mythopoetic” inherited from poets

\(^{44}\) “Heidegger est passe d'une metaphysique du Dasein, c'est-a-dire de l'homme qui pense l'etre, a une metaphysique de l'etre lui-meme." Ide, 133.
like Rilke and Hölderlin. It thus draws together Heidegger’s concern with articulating an ontological approach to the question of art—or, perhaps most accurately, investigating the question of Being through an exploration of the phenomenology of art—and his concept of Being as event or Ereignis, articulated in the poetic, semi-mystical language of disclosure and the propiation of the fourfold (Geviert). For Heidegger, art is an event of opening—an un-closing, an un-concealing—to Being. This gives it a truly subversive power, much more than traditional “aesthetics” accords it. For in opposition to the “en-framing” (Ge-stell) narratives and technologies which threaten to reduce the world into an oppressive onto-theological structure, art allows us to “dwell” in the world in a richer, deeper way. As Hölderlin wrote, in a passage continually quoted by Heidegger, “Poetically man dwells upon the earth.” Man’s hermeneutical situation is poetic and creative, open and ecstatically held out unto the ministrations of the mythic gods and angels but grounded in the ‘earthy’ contours of what lies before him. To speak of art is thus to describe something which goes much deeper than colour and symmetry; phenomenologically, art connects human (ontic) experience to Being and das Heilige, the holy. Post-Kantian and modernist ‘aesthetics’ are for Heidegger simply symptomatic of technological enframing, whereas art itself opens new worlds even as it roots itself more deeply in the materiality of earth—specifically, the dynamic interplay between “earth” and “world.” An ontological approach to the question of art digs below the surface of art to find a disclosure of “that Openness which lights up the things of earth,

45 See Caputo, 176-179.
which enables us to behold them in their radical actuality, and which is never itself, therefore, conceivable as a being.” This is why, alongside the example of a painting by Rembrandt, Heidegger also suggests the way art functions by giving the example of a Greek temple, which “gathers” earth and world, sky and mortals, into a particular, meaningful topos.

“The Origin of the Work of Art” thus also takes final aim at aesthetic philosophies that bear the trace of an onto-theological structure, including traditional typologies of art both Catholic and Protestant. For Heidegger, much of Western philosophy implicitly depends on a biblical or Platonic framework wherein all objects are “made” by a Creator; their form is not intrinsic but has been designed for a use or purpose. This “aesthetic” presupposition of “purpose”—a place in God’s grand design, whether conceived along Catholic or Protestant lines—can obscure the “undisguised presence” of the thing, the manifold aistheton which gives itself to us (yet also retreats from us) through touch and sense. To the extent that it is possible, Heidegger advocates yielding oneself to a thing “as it is in its own being,” and here the significance of his approach to art reveals itself as an attempt to undo centuries of aesthetic discourse. As Aristotle recognized in different terms, works of art have like all things a “thingly” character which cannot be avoided even in the complex processes of aesthetic (sensual) and cognitive experience. Heidegger characteristically explicated this “thingly” remainder with reference to language itself. In the Greek (i.e. pre-Socratic) linguistic realm, the

47 Scott, 156.
properties (*ta sumbebekota*) of a thing were “already” assembled around a “core” (*to hupokeimenon*), making “thingness” and all the other qualities of a thing coterminous—there was no need to penetrate to an “essence,” because the relationship between the thing and its ‘secondary’ qualities had not been artificially (i.e. linguistically) broken. In the transition to Latin, however, “core” and “properties” became *substantia* and *accidens*, where properties are “accidental” to the actual essence of a thing. The verbal structure of a sentence—“subject-predicate”—is transposed back onto the object itself, falsely alienating describable “properties” from “essence.” This “rational,” scholastic mode of engagement Heidegger characterizes as an “assault,” a misguided attempt to penetrate through accidental qualities to an ever-hidden subject.48

The “work of art,” however, discloses truth, in an act of “unconcealment” or “self-showing” whereby the thing can appear in its thingliness. Thus, as Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, "actual experience of the work of art can be called a realized experience of an event of truth."49 This happens through a “disclosure of appropriation,” in which the work of art lights up or reflects “the fourfold” (*Geviert*)—earth, sky, divinities, mortals—as if the world suddenly appeared as a cosmic drama. This “event” or “happening” (*das Ereignis*) is not the product of the ingenious artist so much as it is a momentary, postmetaphysical theophany; a return of metaphysics “after metaphysics.” But most of all, as an act of Nietzschean “appropriation,” the “origin” of the work of art steals the

49 Gadamer, quoted in David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 111.
fire of the elemental power of the world, summoning and unveiling the gods at the exact moment they are most veiled. Even if the gods are conceived of in more secular terms as "powers of Being which permit things to sojourn on the earth" it is clear that the poet and the artist are engaged in a Promethean task, summoning the depths of Being in a way that calls into ontological question the basic hermeneutical structures we inhabit. As Heidegger puts it, art is itself "an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being." Art "allow[s] something to arise" out from "the essential source in the founding leap [Sprung]" into history. Heidegger defines this Sprung as "the transporting of a people into its appointed task [Aufgegebenes] as the entry into its endowment [Mitgegebenes]."

Heidegger investigates the nature of Gestalt (figure or "form") in his discussion of the rift (Riss) between "earth" and "world." This is a creative tension closely linked to the dynamic between opening/clearing and concealing which for Heidegger is the essence of truth. The artwork subsists both in the jutting out of "earth"—itself "self-closing"—and the "worlding" of "world." The work of art is set forth—or, in architectural terms, erected—in and from earth, from the material. "World is grounded on earth, and earth rises up through world." World, on the other hand, is for Heidegger "the self-opening openness of the broad paths of simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a

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50 Scott, 162.
52 Ibid., 49.
historical people."\textsuperscript{53} This linking of the emergence of truth to historical “destiny” comes at the culmination of Heidegger’s thought, and seems to point to a characteristic and troubling German national interest in its own “blood and soil.” Yet Heidegger’s ontology of art goes deeper than this. We may also bristle at the language of “strife” \textit{(Riss)} at the core of aesthetic truth for Heidegger for its associations with mythological “struggle” \textit{(Kampf)}, another modality with a mixture of political and mystical (think of \textit{jihad} or John of the Cross) overtones. Yet the import of Heidegger’s aesthetics is not just their Teutonic application, but their retrieval of Being in the form of openness and mystery:

Truth is the ur-strife in which, always in some particular way, the open is won: that open within which everything stands and out of which everything withholds itself – everything which, as a being, both shows and withdraws itself.\textsuperscript{54}

Artistic truth emerges out of this essential strife between earth and world and the interplay between hiddenness and visibility which characterizes Being. Form, particularly artistic form, becomes for Heidegger not just the vehicle of a static “radiance” but of truth “setting itself to work”—a dynamic, organic model of truth’s origin in and through the artwork.

\textbf{The holy in the \textit{Kehre}}

As one author describes it, the \textit{Kehre} or “turning” in Heidegger’s thinking, as particularly evinced in essays such as ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1935) and ‘Hölderlin and the
Essence of Poetry” (1936), demonstrates his forfeiting the search for a “universal phenomenological ontology” in favour of thought-ful meditation on the nature of Being. This does entail something of a shift from the existential determination of Dasein (i.e. the human experience of Being) to a concern with Being itself. Yet Dasein remains for Heidegger of critical importance in terms of the constitution of Being. Being is characterized in these later writings as a call or givenness. The “nothing” which animated Heidegger’s project in Being and Time is revealed as the ‘veil of beings,” and (as one author puts it) the “unveiling of being is increasingly described positively as the occurrence of being itself, as the voice of being calls upon us, revealing the beings as being, that is, unveiling being as ‘the marvel of all marvels, that beings are.” Being is thus always-already being in its being unveiled, a dynamic movement at once both poetic and wondrous—Being “calls upon” Dasein, and it is precisely in this call that its ontological potency is realized. There is a theological resonance here, not least of all with the twentieth-century emphasis on the kerygma as the point where the “call” is actualized (Bultmann, Barth). In Heidegger specifically, however, there are theological echoes where Heidegger follows Hölderlin in describing the poet as the one who must “sense the trace of the fugitive gods,” which is really to be attuned to the holy (das Heilige).

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56 Ibid., 14.
57 Ibid., 19.
As John Cobb notes, this later phase in Heidegger's thinking takes poetry not just as a thematic motif but as a model of thinking.\(^{59}\) While openness and wonder are cultivated for philosophy by phenomenology, “this openness is spontaneous to the poet.”\(^{60}\) Philosophy ought to be more like poetry. And so thus like Balthasar, Heidegger opens up the history of Being to both philosophers and poets, paying equal heed to both as hermeneutical guides.

In Heidegger’s provocative text “What is called thinking?” the great philosopher reframes the question as “what is it that calls on us to think?”\(^{61}\) In doing so, he draws attention to the time affinity between thought, beauty, and calling—for beauty “calls” \((\text{kaleo})\) us to living authentically in the world. This is a sentiment echoed throughout Balthasar’s work, for whom “the act of living... is the basis of the act of seeing.”\(^{62}\) Such seeing is occasioned by, as Edward Schillebeeckx writes of Heidegger, “a wonder, the event of Being, by which not only everything is what it is and is given to us, but also by which man exists in the mode of thinking and understanding.”\(^{63}\)

**Phenomenology and Theology**

Balthasar adopts a genealogical approach as a way of reconstructing metaphysics. As he

\(^{59}\) *The Later Heidegger*, 179.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 179.

\(^{61}\) *WICT*, 124.

\(^{62}\) *GL*, 15.

colourfully puts it, Being and glory cannot be violently seized—rather, the “mysteriously radiating glory” comes by reaching through the Christian tradition, not kicking down the door to bypass it. “Whoever violently breaks through the doors, finds the treasuries bare.”

Balthasar cites Hegel and Feuerbach as guilty of this breaking-and-entering which may discover the outer husk of Christian doctrine but “necessarily misses its mysteriously radiating glory.” One must rather re-trace one’s way through the tradition with a sensorium for glory in order to discern and recover it. It is precisely at this point in his historical survey that Balthasar draws on Heidegger. “What for thought can be ‘developed’... avoids error only when it thinks within the horizon of the primordial tradition, where archetypally the depth of Being as a whole has been opened out. There Heidegger is right.”

Heidegger appears at the end of the fifth volume of The Glory of the Lord as one of the only philosophical figures offering “the way back” to the “elemental, historical experience of Being” which has been lost in the West ultimately since the death of Thomas Aquinas. Balthasar suggests contemporary theology must “make Heidegger’s inheritance its own” in order to “apprehend the true intent” of the entire classical tradition of metaphysics, i.e. the philosophical-theological-mythological stream which nourishes Balthasar’s overall project of understanding the nature of biblical “glory.” Balthasar’s own metaphysics draw liberally on early and late Heidegger to summon both

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64 GL5, 248.
65 Ibid., 248.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 9.
a philosophical account of the ontological difference and a primordial Greek sense of the human *Gestalt* shining forth against the terrifying backdrop of the gods—a scenario the later Heidegger describes in terms of event (*Ereignis*) and the “fourfold” (*Geviert*). For Balthasar, like Heidegger, the modern science of aesthetics which has struggled to articulate itself in the wake of Kant is largely bankrupt; with “glory,” transcendental Beauty, and the radiance of Being out of view, philosophical aesthetics has become fragmentary and confused. Only an adequate account of Being (*Sein*) can remedy this situation of ontological forgetfulness. This is why Balthasar characterizes Heidegger’s philosophy as “the most fertile one from the point of view of a potential philosophy of glory.”

Balthasar’s interest in Heidegger dates back at least as far as his doctoral dissertation on the “eschatological problem” in German thought and literature (*Germanistik*), which was eventually published as *Apocalypse of the German Soul* (*Die Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*) as well as an early article entitled “Heidegger’s Philosophy from the Standpoint of Catholicism.”

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68 Fergus Kerr, “Metaphysics.” Balthasar answers Heidegger’s “fourfold” with another, innovative fourfold of his own devising, outlined in the essay “The Miracle of Being and the Fourfold Distinction” which closes out volume 5 of the aesthetics.

69 GL5, 597.

70 Ibid., 449.

71 See also the earlier, shorter version of the dissertation published as Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems in der modernen deutschen Literatur* (Zurich, 1930).

This is where a Balthasarian account of art's ontological potency can take root. Yet there is a key issue to be addressed here regarding the compatibility of philosophical and theological method, particularly in the case of Heidegger. Heidegger’s unique account of truth “setting-itself-to-work” in art, particularly with its emphasis on the Ereignis (literally “event,” but connoting for Heidegger a kind of mutual belonging or “propriation”) of this disclosure, is reminiscent of the ancient Greek paradigm where mankind is “broken open” to the divine. Art is never for Heidegger just about aestheticizing nature, but is the "receptive bringing forth of a unique entity such that truth can emerge within this entity"\(^7\) — a truly generative, disclosive phenomenon. As we shall see, his thought also connects beauty to the “advent of truth,” a concept with roots that extend far beyond modern aesthetics to the rich, Neoplatonic-Thomist theological tradition. However, to adopt Heidegger’s terms wholesale in the service of a “natural theology” of art would be premature. Heidegger himself, though he provides an invaluable methodology for exploring the relationship of art to Being—the language of phenomenology, the exploration of the phenomenon in its self-showing—steadfastly refused to connect phenomenology with theology. For him, theology as a science is “ontic” (concerned with beings and particular “regions of being”) rather than “ontological,” “positive” in its orientation to its content and thus inherently prohibiting the “free appropriation of one’s whole Dasein” necessary for phenomenological

\(^7\) Zuidervaart, 155.
investigation by having the precondition of determinate “faith.” Philosophy, on the other hand, is ontological (rather than ontic) in the sense that it deals with the question of Being itself, and has no such positum as content. Thus for Heidegger philosophy and theology cannot simply be combined, even (as he notes) in a “non-objectifying” theology such as was proposed in the heyday of the “death of God” movement in the 1960s.

Despite this stated incommensurability, it is probably not too much of an overstatement to characterize much of twentieth-century continental philosophy and theology as a response to Heidegger. On the one hand, there are Heidegger’s students, the first generation of disciples who are perhaps closest to his own thought-patterns but shy away from some of his more radical patterns of questioning: here we may cite Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans Jonas, and Karl Löwith as examples. Then there are those who have taken his destruktion of onto-theology in radically “postmodern” directions: Derrida, Vattimo, and a host of others, and, in the theological mode, John Caputo and Jean-Luc Marion.

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74 Pathmarks, 53. “Accordingly, there is no such thing as a Christian philosophy; that is an absolute ‘square circle’… likewise, there is no such thing as a neo-Kantian, or axiological, or phenomenological theology, just as there is no phenomenological mathematics. Phenomenology is always only the name for the procedure of ontology…”


Yet most importantly for our discussion of Balthasar, Heidegger’s thought proved irresistible to Christian theologians in the 1950s and 60s, particularly in the heyday of the “death of God” movement. The call of Being was read precisely as an existential proclamation in line with Bultmann’s purely existential version of the Christian kerygma. Judith Wolfe has outlined three distinct “receptions” of Heidegger’s thought within twentieth-century theology, loosely tied to periods in his own thought. The first is the “existential theology” of Bultmann, Tillich, and John Macquarrie, which continued to understand the (early) Heidegger in the existential terms he repudiated in his Letter to Jean-Paul Sartre. In this Christian existentialism, the existentiell is the fallen, inauthentic human existence which salvation must address. A second, Catholic, approach, was a combination of phenomenology and Thomism, as evinced by Karl Rahner and Edith Stein. Rather than following Przywara’s critique of Heidegger’s anti-metaphysical stance, these thinkers saw Heideggerian phenomenology not as fundamentally closed off to the divine but as deeply compatible with inner aspects of the Thomist tradition. Rahner’s concept of the “supernatural existential” (ubernatürliches Existential) is one example of this pairing. Finally, and most recently, there is the postmetaphysical theology of John Caputo, Merold Westphal, Jean-Luc Marion and others. Here Heidegger’s project of metaphysical destruktion is seen as a radical apophaticism, the intimation of a “God without being” beyond onto-theology.

78 Wolfe, 186-193.
The God who Nietzsche declared as dead is indeed gone—here instead the radical, eschatological openness to the future which in Heidegger’s thought is more genuinely an openness to whatever may come is given Christian articulation. God becomes pure potential and givenness, and Heidegger’s poetic mysticism becomes an invitation to reconsider the Christian tradition in non- or post-metaphysical terms. Even Aquinas and Augustine have been read, by Marion, as eschewing metaphysics.

Laurence Hemming has argued persuasively, echoing Hans Jonas, that “Heidegger cannot be adjunct to any given theological project—hermeneutics, transcendental Thomism or radical systematics—but rather his atheism, properly understood, will bring us into confrontation with that tradition from out of which theology has also worked.” By “that tradition,” I take Hemming to mean the history of Being. There is no space in Heidegger’s thought for the Christian God. Yet we must still ask, along with Heidegger, “Wie kommt der Gott in die Philosophie?” (“How does the god enter philosophy?”).

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79 Wolfe, 193-206.  
80 Hemming, 30.  
81 “I want to show how for Heidegger in this question of das Ereignis there is no external world, there is no internal me, so God is not that one who holds the two together ... I am inextricably concerned with world and bound up with it. How, therefore, after Heidegger's atheism does God enter this world that I am (because it worlds me)? How does this world that I am not collapse into solipsism, which is to say how am I given by a world (rather than giving a world)?” Hemming, 155.  
As Gill Goulding notes, unlike his contemporary and sometime adversary in Catholic theology Karl Rahner, Balthasar “never attended any lectures by Heidegger.”

Rahner’s use of Heidegger is pervasive and intentional; he saw in Heidegger’s (seemingly) existential approach the vocabulary for his own concept of the “supernatural existential” while reworking a Heideggerian concept of the sublime in Catholic terms. Recasting Heidegger’s thought in the language of transcendental Thomism, Rahner reads Heidegger’s dynamic movement of opening as akin to Bonaventure’s journey of the mind into God. There are further layers to “the complexity of Rahner’s appropriation of Heidegger” which suggest Rahner has more in common with Balthasarian “Heideggerian Thomism” than the Neo-Kantian ‘turn to the subject’ he has been associated with. Yet as Goulding points out, echoing Fergus Kerr, “Balthasar is far more radically ‘Heideggerian’ than Rahner ever was,” evincing perhaps a fuller reception of his thought. To understand Balthasar’s thought, and in particular his ontology, it is critical to examine his relationship to the famous German thinker. While Heidegger’s liberal Protestant interlocutors of the 1950s and 60s found their work animated by the language of existential anxiety and the “event” of faith through their reading of *Being and Time*, Balthasar’s use of Heidegger lies more in the way he takes up Heidegger’s overarching quest for an adequate account of Being. Like Heidegger, Balthasar returns

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86 Fritz, 7.
87 Ibid.
to the most elemental summoning of Being available in the philosophical tradition.

Heidegger and Balthasar both seek “the way back” to a deeper, richer understanding of Being, a wellspring of authentic truth, beauty, and (though harder to discern in Heidegger’s thought) ethical goodness.

I suggest that perhaps unlike some iterations of “Heideggerian” theology, Balthasar is a thinker able to properly appropriate Heidegger’s methodological atheism as a "vibrant pedagogy.” Balthasar’s own deployment of Heideggerian terms points to a reception of his thought that makes space for alternate, in this case theological, modes of articulating Dasein (human being-there, one of the most central concepts in Heidegger’s phenomenology). Heidegger’s postmetaphysical ontology, and particularly the "openness" it posits as the basic human condition, is ripe with theological (though not onto-theological) possibility—the articulation of a theology both ontic and ontological. For Balthasar, it is not that theology does not speak of Being because it is concerned with a particular, ontic object—Christ—rather, “a Christian metaphysic is the display of the presence of God the Creator within Being itself.”

To be sure, Heidegger vehemently rejected any attempts to harmonize his thought with theology in the traditional sense. When he wrote in his final essay that "only a god can save us," it seems evident he had in mind the pagan gods of ancient Greece; theology,

88 Hemming, 45-46.
for Heidegger, remains an ontic pursuit, closed off from the free, poetic disclosure of Being. He calls this type of theology “theiology,” a capitulation to ontic concerns.

Being and God are not identical and I would never attempt to think the essence of God by means of Being. . . . If I were yet to write a theology—to which I sometimes feel inclined—then the word Being would not occur in it. Faith does not need the thought of Being. When faith has recourse to this thought, it is no longer faith.89

Heidegger does then open the possibility of a theology which is not forgetful of Being. However, this requires theology to be first and foremost a first-order discourse – open to the event of revelation itself, the “Christian phenomena”—“phenomenologically presuppositionless... allowing that which appears to give itself such as it gives itself.”90 As in Hölderlin’s poetry, the gods played with us in our childhood; yet in the modern age, they have fled, and theology too is symptomatic of this loss of poetic presence. As one commentator puts it, for Heidegger

Theology, therefore, only fully takes place when the indifference of humans to gods and of gods to humans is at its maximum. Theology is premised on the absence of the gods and our ignorance of them; it is, to put it bluntly, an atheistic enterprise. Talking about the divine takes place whilst the divine is lacking.91

Heidegger writes in his essay on Hölderlin of “the time of the gods that have fled and of the god that is coming.”\(^{92}\) The poet lives in a time “between” the fugitive gods and the “advent” (Kommen) of Being. This impulse in Heidegger’s has been read in eschatological terms, as the faintest hint of the return of Heidegger’s Catholic roots at the very end of his thinking. This is, as Heidegger’s Nietzschean sympathies ought to make clear, something of a mischaracterization. Still, there are still theological echoes throughout Heidegger’s work, particularly in his concept of the Holy (das Heilige). The Holy is the “sheer presence of being in the finite realities of the earth... that power and form wherewith a thing is what it is—whose penumbra of mystery naturally evokes an attitude of awe and astonishment.”\(^{93}\)

Also important in terms of Balthasar's reception of Heidegger is Heidegger’s rejection of ontotheology, which is worth defining in detail.\(^{94}\) Ontotheologies, for Heidegger, are basic answers to the question of “is-ness” which govern and shape a particular historical epoch, a “constellation of intelligibility” or en-framing structure which sustains a particular cultural-political moment and simultaneously enforcing a forgetfulness about Being - “holding back” the “floodwaters of ontological historicity.”\(^{95}\) The roots of ontotheology as a cultural reality date back at least as far as the Greeks. In Heidegger’s genealogy, ontotheology arises from the lethal combination of philosophical ontology—

\(^{92}\) Scott, “The Poetics of Belief,” 151.
\(^{93}\) Scott, 162.
\(^{95}\) Thomson, 20.
answers to the question “what is being?” such as Thales of Miletus’ view that everything is made of water—with theological intuition, as in Anaximander’s suggestion that the source (arche) of all being is the infinite. In Heidegger’s history of ideas Plato, by combining Thales and Anaximander, yields the ontotheological.\footnote{Ibid., 12-13.} Ontotheology, through the ages, has taken many political, social, and religious forms, all linked by a close identification of God and Being, such that the sociopolitical condition of what “is” is given divine legitimation and authority. Onto-theology is invisible, guiding an epoch into a certain constellation of power and technique such that resistance is impossible, indeed unthinkable. Modernity, including late modernity, is for Heidegger in the grip of a “nihilistic, technological” ontotheology.\footnote{Ibid., 2.} Transcending the late-modern, technological ontotheology of our age—its “enframing” (Gestell)—thus comes partly from the philosophical destruktion of ontotheology. Yet what Heidegger sets in its place is not a grand new philosophical system but a practical, experiential way of being in the world—“learning to practice the phenomenological comportment he calls “dwelling.””\footnote{Ibid., 20.} Art teaches us how to “dwell,” for the essence of art is poetry. Heidegger’s much-discussed Kehre to the mythic and poetic is thus not a valuation of the irrational over the logical and rational, but stems “from what he thinks poets can teach us about those enduringly meaningful experiences that make our finite lives most worth living.”\footnote{Ibid., 20-21.}

New Horizons
Art is thus radical not only in a political sense (though it may be) but much more deeply - it makes possible a new horizon of Being, a new event with far-reaching implications. Art unfolds an ‘unconcealing’ function in relation to enframing ontotheologies: it first serves to “open up the implicit (or “background”) ontology and ethics through which a historical community comes to understand itself and its world,” then discloses intelligibility—primarily be exposing what conceals itself, the essential strife between earth and world.\textsuperscript{100}

The Being disclosed in the artwork is described by the late Heidegger as Ereignis. This term in German normally means “event." Yet Heidegger defines it as the propriation of the fourfold. The clearest explanation of “the fourfold” in Heidegger’s thought can be found in the short essay “Building Dwelling Thinking.” Here his concern is to characterize the fundamental activity of Dasein as “dwelling” or inhabiting. Of course there are architectural and spatial dimensions to this discussion—on the most basic level, we “dwell” in homes rather than railway stations. And yet the “dwelling” of Dasein extends into all “building.” Man dwells between earth and sky, mortal existence unto death and the eternity of the gods. Heidegger characterizes the Ereignis in terms of the mutual belonging and “propriation” of these four poles. Mortals and gods, earth and sky, “enown” each other in a reciprocal hermeneutic. The “event” of the work of art is the “lighting-up” (Lichtung) of this moment of exchange, and is also the basis for any

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 44.
discussion of the work’s truth. Beauty, for Heidegger, comes from the shining-forth of the truth of Being in the artwork—from truth “setting-itself-to-work” in material form. The “origin of the work of art,” in Heidegger’s famous phrase, is thus Being itself, with the “fugitive gods” and the primal earth itself “propriated” in the background. "Poetically man dwells upon the earth,” in reflection and creative intuition, before the eyes of the gods—and this extends into all areas of life.

If this is the revolutionary, deepening power of art, however, the modern science of aesthetics for Heidegger is largely a betrayal of this potential. Aesthetics, like culture and philosophy, has fallen prey to a pernicious enframing—the ethos of industrial manufacturing and technologism. In the age of the global art market, these warnings take on a particular prophetic edge. If art is purely commodity, it has lost its vital connection to “shepherding into being.” Iain Thomson sums this up well: “Because great art works inconspicuously to establish, maintain, and transform humanity’s historically variable sense of what is and what matters, Heidegger emphasizes that ‘art is the becoming and happening of truth’.”

If this connection to truth and Being is severed, it is also no longer connected to beauty, defined as Heidegger does in “The Origin of the Work of Art” as not only truth “setting-itself-to-work” but “truth’s taking its place.” As Heidegger puts it: “Truth is the truth of Being. Beauty does not occur alongside and apart from this truth. When truth sets itself

\[101\text{ Ibid., 43.}\]
into the work, it appears. Appearance – as this being of truth in the work and as work – is beauty. Thus the beautiful belongs to the advent of truth, truth’s taking of its place.\textsuperscript{102}

Nathan O. Scott sums up Heidegger’s “anti-aesthetics” and their relevance to theology well:

"The artist seeks to bring us into a relationship of intense intimacy with a given event, with some specific phenomenon. What he invites is an attitude of enthrallment before the sheer singularity of whatever may be the object which he is holding up for attention... Whereas the scientific view of the world is ultimately predatory, driving toward possession and mastery and control, the poetic imagination in its fascination with the concrete, with the individual qua individual, wants, as Heidegger would say, simply to let things be."\textsuperscript{103}

The Fourfold or Geviert summoned by the artist stands against the dominant “event of Being” that holds sway in the contemporary world, namely the enframing (Ge-stell) of technologizing and manipulation which holds off the coming of the god(s).\textsuperscript{104}

Opening

Heidegger’s thought, as has been demonstrated, makes openness—or more precisely, the Open, a “clearing” where Being can emerge in clarity—an absolute priority. The artist is uniquely able to make a space for this opening, the artwork itself being not just a conduit for self-communication but an irruption of Being—a summoning or

\textsuperscript{102} “The Origin of the Work of Art.”
\textsuperscript{103} Scott, 159.
\textsuperscript{104} Caputo, 182.
ingathering of the Fourfold of earth, sky, gods, and mortals. Art is openness and interruption—it allows us a more authentic experience of Being in its fullness.

Lambert Zuidervaart, comparing Heidegger’s “anti-aesthetics” to the work of Habermas, suggests that the positive legacy of Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” is the way it returns art to a more originary, eventual understanding of truth—one that, by not resting content with the “correctness of propositions” is free to speak of the “more” of aesthetic experience—whether one understands this appearance in theological or secular terms, as the disclosure of Being or the muted voice of the gods. However, by emphasizing “disclosure” rather than “validity,” as well as by trying to circumnavigate polarities such as form-matter and subject-object, Heidegger’s “hypermetaphysical” ontology does not give much of an indication for what the truth of art really is.

Balthasar on Heidegger

Balthasar’s primary criticism of Heidegger is that he, like Nebel, ultimately denies the analogia entis. In Balthasar’s reading of Heidegger, the ontological difference between Being and beings is collapsed into an identification between the two, where “man and

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105 “The ‘more’ can be given various accounts, where as historically acquired wisdom that has no precise historical origin, or as a proleptic vision of liberation that keeps breaking through the horizons of cultural practices and social institutions, or as a spiritual connection with the earth or the universe or the divine... I suspect that no conception of artistic truth will be able to dispense with this dimension, which I consider simultaneously utopian and critical.” Zuidervaart, 160.
Being attain to each other” in an “event” of truth.\textsuperscript{106} Balthasar is not suggesting, as Heidegger thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, that Heidegger’s philosophy reduces Being to the human. Certainly it is possible to read Heidegger in a radically humanistic way – he asserts that “there is truth—unveiling and unveiledness—only when and as long as Dasein exists.”\textsuperscript{107} However, for Heidegger Being is not purely subjective; truth is not just in \textit{Dasein} (human “being-there”), but rather “so far as we exist we are in truth.”\textsuperscript{108} Truth is not ‘just’ a human “construction” or “projection,” though phenomenologically speaking these actions are necessary in \textit{Dasein}’s experience of de-concealing Being; rather, “man is \textit{in the truth},” experiencing in his own \textit{Dasein} a primordial, pre-existing unhiddenedness.\textsuperscript{109} Rather than truth being simply in the eye of the beholder, it issues forth from Being itself precisely in the sensual encounter of \textit{Dasein} with the world of phenomenal appearances.

Yet on the other hand, Balthasar recognizes that Heidegger’s “originary” account of truth entails a radical, post-theological privileging of human being and perception: rather than the traditional ‘metaphysics of presence,’ “the ‘pivot’ of Being and of the existent (\textit{Sein-Seiendes}) receives the whole of its meaning from the pivot of Being and human being (\textit{Sein-Dasein}).”\textsuperscript{110} Balthasar suggests that here Heidegger’s question as to why there should be something rather than nothing is thus finally “submerged” in

\textsuperscript{106} GL5, 447.
\textsuperscript{107} Heidegger, \textit{The Basic Problems of Phenomenology}, 219-221.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Heidegger, \textit{The Essence of Truth}, 56.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 621.
human subjectivity—hence “metaphysics must yield its place to a *phenomenology* of Being,” which for Balthasar engenders a loss of the “primal phenomenon” of form. “Balthasar’s point here [in GL1, 158] is that a Heideggerian view of Being leaves no place for the individual self, since it stresses throughout the unity and infinity of existence, which we gaze upon vertiginously, as into a groundless abyss.” For Balthasar, on the other hand, the threat of the abyss is neutralized by Trinitarian love—God has taken on this “threat” in the Incarnation. Thus the self, no longer divorced from form, is free to wonder at the beauty of creation (*admiratio*) and at the supreme form of Christian revelation rather than being imprisoned by what Tillich characterized as our “double awareness” of both belonging to the infinite absolute and simultaneously being excluded from it.

Heidegger’s concern with “onto-theology” was the way it collapsed the ontological difference between beings and Being itself, domesticating the supreme mystery of Being’s self-manifestation and dulling our understanding of the “truth” of Being—a shallow concept of truth as proposition rather than primal unconcealment. For Balthasar, the ontological difference is preserved within the theological contours of the *analogia entis*, the great “similarity in dissimilarity” between beings and God, source of Being, which allows truth to emerge in individual forms (especially artistic forms) in a dynamic, organic way. Heidegger’s thought can be described as anti-aesthetic, in that it is opposed to a false aestheticism that obfuscates the truth-disclosing, ontological

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111 Ibid., 621-622.
112 Davies, 138.
character of art; Balthasar similarly opposes a false aestheticism that rests content with the surface of the form rather than opening itself to the revelation of the “depths” of Being in its self-disclosure. Balthasar thus champions Heidegger as providing "the way back" to a richer appropriation of the Western philosophical tradition. For Balthasar, however, steeped as he was in the classical/Thomist paradigm of the transcendentals, the ontological disclosure of “truth” and “beauty” across the interval of the analogia entis is intimately connected to not just the mystery of Being (as in Heidegger) but divine revelation. To “see the form,” even of a work of art, is not only to experience the deep structures of Being but to be drawn into a “genuine unfolding of [God] in the worldly stuff of nature, man and history.”

*Gelassenheit*

A second quasi-spiritual aspect of Heidegger’s thought which is important for Balthasar’s theological project is his emphasis on silence, in the form of *Gelassenheit* or “letting-be.” As we have seen, Heidegger and Balthasar adopt this term from the German mystic Meister Eckhart as a way of expressing a meditative attitude to the world characterized by surrender and abandonment, "openness to radical mystery” that allows the "voice" of Being to be heard. For both thinkers the *Kommen* of Being itself comes precisely in this in "letting-be," perceiving individual forms not in terms of

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113 GL1, 119.
114 Scott, 154.
115 Ibid., 154.
instrumental use-value but in the way poets and artists see them—as unique, disclosive revelations to be cherished and marvelled at. The technologizing impulse is characterized by the will to power and enslaves the world in a toxic “enframing” narrative, blind to the glory of Being.\(^\text{116}\) The artist, on the other hand, is an "adept in the art of 'paying heed'," of surrender and attentiveness, who can instruct us to do likewise.\(^\text{117}\) Letting-be or “releasement” (\textit{Gelassenheit}) thus becomes for Heidegger an “ethical and aesthetic phronesis or practical wisdom.”\(^\text{118}\) This does not mean that the artist does not engage in “work”—in fact, for Heidegger struggle (\textit{Riss}) is very much a part of the “workly” character of art. Yet ontologically, the work of the artist is one of openness to Being so that it might irrupt on the canvas. The will to create is the will to let materials shine forth in their truth and radiance.

As has been stated, Balthasar is dissatisfied with a certain tradition of post-Kantian aesthetics. However, as Matthew Daigler argues, Bathasar along with Heidegger reads Kant in light of a doctrine of Being, and in doing so transposes Kant’s aesthetic “disinterestedness” into a new register.\(^\text{119}\) For Balthasar, disinterestedness becomes \textit{Gelassenheit}, “letting-be” which Balthasar also characterizes in terms of a dispossessive

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 158.
\(^{117}\) Ibid., 159.
\(^{118}\) Thomson, 24.
“letting-stream”: “an ekstasis out of [one’s] own closed self” which in turn leads toward the “infinite poverty of the fullness of Being and, within it, the God who does not hold on to himself.”120 God’s own apatheia or disinterestedness, so central to discussions of divine passibility and mutability, is answered by a human surrender or will. Receptivity and openness are at the heart of Balthasar’s theological anthropology, consistent with his broader emphasis on the total openness of creation to God. Balthasar quotes Rilke: “I know that God did not put us among the various things in order that we should make a selection but so that we should undertake to receive so completely and utterly that in the end we are able to receive nothing but what is beautiful, in our love, in our watchful attention, in our unappeasable wondering.”121 The task of the artist becomes, as in Heidegger, a matter of paying heed and listening so as to be attentive to the revelation of Being—a coming up close to Being in order to be able to let it speak through one’s art.

This is also Heidegger’s approach, yet for Balthasar the great philosopher of Being lacks the necessary dimension of divine charis alongside epiphaneia and poeisis: “Heidegger represents an attempt to retrieve the classical and Christian form of metaphysical love, as detached readiness for the call of Being; but this attempt must fail, because he ... turns the oscillation of Being and human existence, which should remain open and pointing beyond itself, into the fixed and indissoluble form of a sphinx, before which and

120 GL5, 627.
121 GL4, 20.
for which man cannot live and love." For Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* is silence in the face of the void, awareness of nothingness and death which enlivens our attentive “dwelling” on earth; for Balthasar, on the other hand, silence is the precondition for the hearing of the Word. Gawronksi has framed this interplay between word and silence in terms of a point of connection between Christian theology and Eastern religions in Balthasar’s thought, a link made more credible when one considers Heidegger’s similar preoccupation with Japanese Zen in his later writings.\(^\text{123}\)

Balthasar realizes that *Gelassenheit* as employed by Eckhart and Heidegger can be radical: “Could the glory of Being which soars above all that exists not be understood in its unsurpassable alienness in another way : as abandonment, instead of letting-be? Where is the guarantee that the finite being is genuinely sheltered in the infinite indifference of Being?" \(^\text{124}\) But this is precluded by revelation, the most complete form of the “address from Being.” Being itself becomes not the light itself, but a witness to the light – a transparency which begins with the childlike wonder that one “is permitted to be in the midst of what exists.” \(^\text{125}\)

**Comparison**

The discipline of theology threatens for Heidegger to cloud and obscure the true task of

\(^{122}\) [GL5, 643.]

\(^{123}\) Gawronksi, *Word and Silence.*

\(^{124}\) GL5, 628.

\(^{125}\) GL5, 633.
philosophy, which consists of unrestricted questioning of Being in its self-disclosure. A
"theology of art," then, would restrict art’s ontological openness. We must then ask:
Does Balthasar’s theological aesthetics allow, or perhaps even expand the kind of
openness Heidegger espouses? Though from his comments on the incommensurability
of theology and phenomenology it seems clear that Heidegger would disagree, the
answer presented here is affirmative: for like ontology, "theology has to be open on all
sides, like a fragment out of which glory itself can shine." For Balthasar, the
"transcendental epiphany of the entirety of the world's Being" gives us a "glimpse of the
structures of revelation" with Christ at its "midpoint." Balthasar sees "Being's opening
in truth" not as an "arelational" opening "in itself" but as an "opening for," a gift or
offering. Thus Beauty is closely related to this eternal movement of opening: Beauty
is "the transparency, through the phenomenon, of the mysterious background of being
... the immediate manifestation of the never-to-be mastered excess of manifestation
contained in everything manifest, of the eternal 'ever more' implicit in the essence of
every being." 

In terms of art, for Balthasar a form such as a great work of art can only be “seen for
what it is” when it is “perceived and received as the appearance of a certain self-
opening of the ground of the depth of life contained in it.” “It is in the reciprocity of
Being’s openness and our self-surrender to the light which leads to revelation but

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126 Scola, 6.
127 Epilogue, 63.
128 TL1, 217.
129 TL1, 223.
always within the ever greater mystery of the light of Being." Or elsewhere: "Posed purely from man's point of view, the question of being includes the search for a light that sheds light on the meaning of man. But how is this light to be interpreted?"

Balthasar thus disagrees with Heidegger’s contention (in “Phenomenology and Theology,” and elsewhere) that “the question of being is closed for Christian believers. For him, like Heidegger, philosophical aesthetics must yield to a phenomenological ontology, attentive to the persuasive call of Being. Yet this phenomenology must yield again to the eyes of faith. Balthasar parts ways with Heidegger at the point at which the “opening” to Being must take on the shape of an opening to the triune God rather than to a primordial givenness or mythopoeic emergence. As Louis Dupre puts it, the “revelation of God in Christ is not merely the ultimate manifestation of Being,” but the free self-giving of a free God – a super-aesthetic phenomenon that surpasses and calls into question worldly aesthetics. Revelation thus becomes the measure for aesthetics and metaphysics, rather than the other way around. For the Catholic theologian, the quest of philosophy, namely the quest for Being which reaches an important climax in Heidegger, must ultimately lead to the revelation of God on the cross, the simultaneous beginning and end of metaphysics.

As John Riches notes, Balthasar’s most valuable contribution is thus “the calling of

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130 Leahy, 33.
131 Epilogue, 22.
133 Dupre, 302.
theology back to its proper task of the unravelling of being, of the tracing out of the lineaments of the reality of the incarnate, crucified, descended, and risen Lord.”

As has been shown, for Balthasar, like Heidegger, an understanding of the aesthetic must penetrate beyond the modern forgetfulness of Being and recover something of the intuitive ontological “sense” of the ancient Greeks. For the pre-Socratic philosophers, but perhaps more importantly for Homer and the poets, the world is man’s being broken open so that he may grasp the appearing of the divine. This pagan “openness” is taken up wholesale by Heidegger; Balthasar, however, appropriates it through the lens of the Christian narrative, with the Christ-event at its epicenter. Like Heidegger, for Balthasar the radical “openness of being”—human existence or Dasein “polarized” by its experience of the mysterium tremendum et fascinans—is the origin of art (“the great religious or ‘mythological’ art of all people”). Yet for the theologian, above and beyond the ontological difference between beings and Being there is the theological difference. Christ embodies both of these “differences” in human form as the concretum universale, the “analogy of being in human form.” As the perfect work of art—the perfect proportion of beauty, truth, and goodness, the phenomenal “appearance” who, as “form,” perfectly expresses his divine radiance – there can be no reckoning with art, literature, philosophy, religion or even

135 Ibid., 21.
136 “Revelation and the Beautiful,” 105.
the “science of Being” itself which is not deeply connected to the fountain of Being and Life.

Balthasar’s book on the problem of Angst (The Christian and Anxiety) is also significant in the way it links Heideggerian existential anxiety—the fear, dread, and boredom which prompt one to answer the call of Being—to “wonder” (admiratio), taking an aspect of Heidegger’s thought and situating it within a Thomist ontology. Balthasar’s criticism of previous treatments of anxiety, from Kierkegaard to those “secularizers” who followed in his wake, is that they have neglected the theological dimension. As Anthony Cirelli points out, for Balthasar anxiety is prompted by the spectre of the ontological difference, yet this can only be “rightly understood by means of a theological interpretation” – with reference to the limitations of the human subject in the face of divine mystery. The interior “void of nothingness” which Heidegger proposes as a propadeutic towards Being becomes a space which God alone may fill precisely “as the unfelt fullness, as fullness in the void”—again, a reading of Heidegger which finds him in harmony with Aquinas. For Balthasar, art begins in wonder at the mystery of Being, yet this leads not just to terror but to wonder of at the “deep things” of God.

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140 Ibid.
Carpenter has suggested perceptively that the “first word” of Balthasar’s doctoral dissertation, *Der Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele*, is “terror” (*Schreckliche*).¹⁴¹ In Balthasar’s analysis of the “eschatological problem” in German literature and philosophy, “beauty without the Christian God can only be beauty-made-terror.”¹⁴² Balthasar’s simultaneous criticism and appropriation of Heidegger fits into this overall pattern: without God, wonder collapses into fear.

To be sure, “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom,” a theme drawn out by Kierkegaard and which has exerted considerable influence on the tradition of *agnosia* or apophatic unknowing associated with mystical figures such as John of the Cross. Yet such “fear” is only within the context of relationship with God. The most authentic answer to the ontological question posed by art is love. Balthasar’s own “fourfold” takes as a central image not man polarized by nakedness to earth, sky, and divinity but, uniquely in Western philosophy, the maternal image of an infant awakening in her mother’s arms: “Its ‘I’ awakens in the experience of a ‘Thou’: in its mother’s smile through which it learns that it is contained, affirmed, and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively encompassing, already actual, sheltering and nourishing.”¹⁴³ There is a progression from humanity held out into the nothing to humanity held close by divine love. The fundamental mode of *Dasein* does not begin with anxiety, but rather in a

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¹⁴² Ibid., 11.
¹⁴³ *GL5*, 616.
sense of gracious embrace. It is this parental love that then allows the subject to experience Being fully and freely—a sense of play which moves to a deep wonder at the manifestation of Being in so many forms.\textsuperscript{144} Metaphysics is transfigured into a theological—and implicitly Trinitarian—vessel.

Nonetheless, the Heideggerian method of negation or nihilation (what Balthasar calls “noughting”) still plays a role in Balthasar’s thought. Heidegger’s \textit{Angst}, “in which Being as such disappears for me and with it my sense of self,” becomes in essence the way in which the authentic ontological question is asked: why is there something rather than nothing?\textsuperscript{145} This nihilation results, as in Heidegger, in a total opening. Yet for Balthasar, “primal and overpowering wonder” is not satisfied by awareness of monolithic Being alone. “Rather, my wonder is directed at both sides of the Ontological Difference, whether this is construed in Thomist or Heideggerian terms,” by which Balthasar means both the ‘universal’ and the particular, the idea and the ‘realized’ form. The polarity between the two is where Being is disclosed.

Balthasar thus reads Heidegger in concert with Aquinas. For, as Fergus Kerr notes, Heidegger recalls the important insight that the fundamental stance of \textit{Dasein} must be openness—to the light of Being, in Heidegger’s case, and to theological light, in Aquinas and Balthasar. “We are what we are by being in the light,” for Being is pure gift (\textit{die Er-}

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 617.
“But more than anyone else, Thomas Aquinas is in harmony with Heidegger...

For both, the act of Being, which comprehends within it all that is, is illumination (and thus the original locus of truth), is origin... and at the same time it is nothingness (the non-subsisting), the unity behind all number.”

Balthasar’s thought can thus be thought of as “correcting and completing” Heidegger’s philosophical questioning. This is Balthasar’s answer to the Kehre in Heidegger’s thought. Sein and Dasein exist in a polarity structure, a dynamic relationship across the analogy of being. Just because the triune God is transcendent does not mean that the analogical gap—the divide between what we can say of God based on our experience of the universe and what God actually is in himself—is so wide that it nullifies any pretense to meaning in theological language. Instead, it is possible to speak of God and of the beauty of God through analogy, even though there is always an interval between our formulations and the truth. Instantiations of the beautiful and good in some way echo the primal, divine Beauty; God’s self-revelation can legitimately “form an analogy to that worldly beauty however far it outstrips it.” This is the via positiva, the ‘positive’ movement of ascent to the divine, which affirms that God’s intent to “communicate beauty and harmony to the world” is manifested at least partly in that which is

\[ \text{gebnis}. \]

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147 GL5, 434-435. See also Wenzinger, 93-101.
148 Wenzinger, 100.
149 GL2, 11.
intelligible to the finite human mind. The creation yields clues as to God’s nature, in the form of “like unlikenesses and unlike likenesses” which in some way point back to the Creator. Balthasar also derives a "polarity structure" from Przywara; it presupposes the analogy of being, a "positive moment" of likeness across the ontological difference. Contra Husserl who sought to concentrate on essences by "bracketing" existence, Balthasar maintains a necessary polarity between existence and essence. This is applied to Beauty as well as Being. “Hovering within the world between Being and entity, as determined by the metaphysics of Thomas and to some extent again in Heidegger... prevents any fixing of beauty to... a readily-grasped system of concepts.” Beauty itself must be understood analogically, not containing divine glory

The work of art is “truth-setting-itself-to-work,” an event of the giving of Being rather than the private domain of an individual artist. The very best art seems to irrupt not just from the paintbrush of the master artist or the pen of the gifted poet, but from a deeper, unnameable source. Balthasar identifies this deeper source which “appears” within the “appearance” as the Christian God, revealed in Christ and echoing through art and metaphysics.

GL2, 180.
Nichols, Say it is Pentecost, 3.
Ibid., 27
GL5, 598; Quoted in Murphy, Christ the Form of Beauty, 11.
Gonzalez-Andrieu, Bridge to Wonder.
Heidegger’s anti-aesthetics are revolutionary. Yet for some, they do not go far enough. In his commentary on “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Jacques Derrida suggests that asking "what is art" or "what is the origin of art" presupposes the shape of the answer: "One [thus] makes of art in general an object in which one claims to distinguish an inner meaning, the invariant, and a multiplicity of external variations through which, as through so many veils, one would try to restore the true, full, originary meaning: one, naked."\(^{156}\) For Derrida the frame (parergon) gives rise to the work (ergon), such that it is impossible to disentangle (or, employing Heidegger’s example of the shoelaces) de-interlace the art object from art history, criticism, and other systems of discourse.\(^{157}\) For Derrida, the “shoes” in the artwork are not empty, but worn by innumerable cultural and linguistic ghosts; painting thus becomes a kind of restitution, repaying a "ghostly debt."\(^{158}\) The “brushstroke” is the Riss (“strife”) which “not only opens above the gulf [the abyss] but holds together the opposite edges of it.”\(^{159}\) Like John Caputo, Derrida criticizes Heidegger for not going far enough in his dismantling or destruktion of the

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\(^{157}\) See Derrida, 9. “...[In] the first [section] I am occupied with folding the great philosophical question of the tradition (“What is art?” “the beautiful?” “representation?” “the origin of the work of art?” etc.) on to the insistent atopics of the parergon: neither work (ergon) nor outside the work (hors d’oeuvre), neither inside nor outside... it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work.”

\(^{158}\) Derrida, 258.

\(^{159}\) Derrida, 5-6.
Western tradition—provocatively, he “dreams of a painting without truth.” Most notably, as Caputo underlines, despite his resolute interest in blurring the lines between form and matter, essence and “accidental” properties, Heidegger remains within an essentially Greek paradigm and never encompasses the other prevalent (biblical) paradigm—the Hebraic. By excluding the Jewish, rabbinical perspective, Heidegger betrays his own embeddedness within an enframing structure, one with dangerous political implications. Heidegger’s Nazi involvement thus becomes not only a matter of a misunderstanding, but stems from a central inadequacy in his own thought. Heidegger’s conception of art, like his understanding of Being, is deeply evental and historical in nature—for him, the origin of the artwork is bound up with “the historical existence of a people” in terms of destiny and “endowment.” It is hard not to read statements like these as anything other than German nationalism considering Heidegger’s ambiguous relationship with the Nazi regime. Yet perhaps there is a way to redeem Heidegger’s emphasis on the historicity of Being and art, precisely by altering its context. Applied to a cultural group other than Germans—particularly to historically marginalized groups precisely like the Jewish people, or African-Americans—the Heideggerian vocabulary of art unfolding the destiny and unique historical being of a people resonates with ideas of freedom, struggle, and eschatology.

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160 Derrida, 9.
161 For more on the link between deconstruction and rabbinic exegesis, see Susan A. Handelman, The Slayers of Moses (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982).
162 The publishing of Heidegger’s Black Notebooks in recent months has underlined the connection of his thought to National Socialist tendencies, and the results are not good.
163 “Origin,” 49.
Balthasar, as a recent book has pointed out, does embrace a Jewish perspective in a way unprecedented for many twentieth-century theologians, Catholic or Protestant. Yet the question of “origin” as framed by (the Jewish) Derrida remains a troublesome one. Is Balthasar’s project, with its arche (origin) as God, itself a form of ontotheology? Are there aspects of Balthasar’s thought which collapse in a postmetaphysical situation? These are questions to be answered in the following chapter.

What can be said at this juncture is this: although he outlines a theologia Gloria which certainly draws on Neoplatonic themes, it is a mistake to simply identify Balthasar’s thought as essentially ontotheological, a stepwise progression from beings to Being, the highest expression of which is God. Rather, the maius dissimilitudino of the analogia entis poses an ever-greater distance between the infinite God and even the most general concept of Being. For Balthasar, Being is a “revealed and revealing light,” not synonymous with the free Triune God. Heidegger’s concern was to disentangle philosophy and theology, in essence making it methodologically impossible to identify God and Being. As David Schindler points out, this is an intensification of the Kantian priority of “making a space for faith” by assigning philosophy to the domain of reason. In a sense, Balthasar follows this critique, and so thus his work is not incompatible with, for example, Jean-Luc Marion’s “God Without Being”—in Marion, as well as in David

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164 See Sciglitano, Marcion and Prometheus.
Bentley Hart, a privileging of “distance” in Trinitarian theology is able to critique aspects of the “ontotheological” tradition while upholding the genuine Christian metaphysic to be found in Aquinas and Bonaventure. Yet in another sense, Balthasar calls into question the possibility of “neutral” philosophy that is not open, at every juncture, to the theological: “the world as it concretely exists is one that is always already related either positively or negatively to the God of grace and supernatural revelation. There are no neutral points or surfaces in this relationship ... in the same way, man's cognitive powers operate either under the positive sign of faith or under the negative sign of unbelief.”\textsuperscript{166} Thus ontology must always proceed “under the sign” of either faith or doubt—and so the dividing line between metaphysics and theology is difficult to discern.

Moreover, contra Heidegger, Balthasar’s metaphysics are simultaneously ontic (concerned with particular “regions of being(s”), ontological, and theological. Heidegger’s contention is that philosophy must exclude the divine as an \textit{a priori}, for the failure to do so results in a God “enervated and emasculated” of glory—in short, “blasphemy.”\textsuperscript{167} This is the impulse behind Heidegger’s much-quoted claim that if he were to write a theology, it would nowhere contain the word “Being.” Heidegger speaks instead of \textit{das Heilige}, the holy, a more primordial category which tends toward a pagan, mythic mysticism. For the early Heidegger, theology can never be truly open to

\[\textit{\textsuperscript{166}This quote appears both in the short introduction to TL1 (p.10), and in the longer introduction (p. 30).}\]
\[\textit{\textsuperscript{167}Daigler, 380.}\]
Being—it can perhaps be existentiell, but never existential—as it must remain faithful to its own positum (here we think of Karl Barth’s supposed “positivism of revelation.”) This is not to say theology is in essence wrong or wrongheaded, only that phenomenology and theology cannot be integrated. After the Kehre, however, Heidegger does provide the possibility for a phenomenology of the holy in terms of the elusive “whole” (Heil), the “native soil which makes possible the advent of a God or of the gods.” The holy is “named” by the poets, taking the form of this or that deity through history—it is, however, more primordial than any theology, arising as it does out of Being itself. It seems to stand to reason then that for Heidegger, “there can be no trans-historical, personal God” such as is found in the Christian tradition. Heidegger himself was critical of contemporaneous attempts to employ his thought in the creation of existential theologies, an approach associated with Ott and Bultmann on the Protestant side and Rahner within Catholicism. Yet his remarks on how the deity “enters” philosophy have proved irresistible to theologians.

So also the technologisms and dangerous “enframing” (Heidegger’s Gestell) narratives of contemporary ideologies of subjugation and control are overthrown by a revolutionary, ontological perspective. The “fragmentary manner” in which truth, beauty, and goodness are understood in the “partial aesthetics” which have followed in the wake of Kant and Baumgarten is replaced by a sense of Being in terms of kalon (that which is “whole, sound, shining, beautiful”) from which earthly forms, including artistic

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168 Michael Haar, quoted in Daigler, 384.
169 Daigler, 386.
forms, originate and find their fullness. The revelation of Christian glory can only enter in dialogue with such a “transcendental aesthetics,” open to the disclosure of Being; a partial aesthetics is inadequate for the job.

What is the significance of this for the contemporary, even postmodern, situation? In After Christianity, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo notes that both Heidegger's destruktion of metaphysics and Nietschze's death of God do not simply result in atheism - that is to say, dismantling one structure in order to construct another. Rather, Heidegger’s de-construction of "objective, stable, and structural" onto-theological metaphysics is only undertaken "in the name of an experience of freedom." It thus paves the way for a new possibility for belief: "since God can no longer be upheld as an ultimate foundation, as the absolute metaphysical structure of the real, it is possible, once again, to believe in God." This is no fundamentalism, nor is it a pure fideism which simply chooses one ideology over others. Rather, such postmetaphysical, postmodern faith follows Heidegger’s intimations of Being as event, Ereignis, drawing attention to the historical or "destinal" character of the “horizon of Being”:

If we are capable of speaking of Being, we must conceive of Being as horizon and as light, rather than the general structure of objects ... the event of Being lies in the double sense of the genitive: the horizon is the opening belonging to Being, but it is also that to which Being itself belongs. Being is not given as a stable an eternal structure. Rather, Being gives itself, again and again, in its occurrence.\(^{172}\)

\(^{170}\) Gianni Vattimo, After Christianity, 4-5. See also Thomas G. Guarino, Vattimo and Theology (London: T&T Clark, 1998).

\(^{171}\) Vattimo, 6.

\(^{172}\) Vattimo, 21.
By this, Vattimo does not mean that Being is an eternal "event." Rather, within history, it is in the here and now a "weakening" by which Being reveals itself not as a stable structure but as an epochal, hermeneutical process. In history, Being gives itself; it is the horizon, the opening which cannot be frozen into a static structure. The response to the call of Being, for Vattimo, is thus to "leap" into the "liberating abyss of tradition." As Anthony Sciglitano points out, Vattimo’s hermeneutical posture is a strategy also adopted by Balthasar; like Vattimo, Balthasar turns to tradition “with Heidegger’s concerns in mind.”173 Yet where Vattimo sees the unfolding of Being mediated through tradition as a kind of Joachimite supersessionism, Balthasar sees tradition as “symphonic,” the plural voices of the past as complementary, rather than evolutionary, contributions to Seinsgeschichte.

We may perhaps rightly read Vattimo’s post-Heideggerian “weak ontology” as diametrically opposed to Balthasar’s integrative theological vision of the analogia entis. Even if Balthasar can be said to avoid the pitfalls of ontotheology – for example, by hewing closer to an Heideggerian paradigm of Being as gift, Er-gebnis – the analogy of being seems to press toward a metaphysics of presence. Yet there are elements of Vattimo’s postsecular analysis with deep resonances to Balthasar’s project. Like Heidegger, Balthasar eschews a static structure of Being in favour of an account of

freedom—both human and divine. Of course, Balthasar yields an account of Being as a transcendental, a metaphysics writ large that initially seems ripe for deconstruction. Yet in Balthasar’s thought, there is also a polarity between Being as “structure” and as “event,” where Being, as a conduit of divine glory, “gives itself, again and again,” through earthly forms—particularly through the theodramatic “form” of Christ. Balthasar is also deeply conscious of the historicity of Being, the way it “gives” itself differently in different epochs. “The Romanesque, Gothic, or Baroque” is in a sense closed off to us now—yet through the “bridge” of meaning, we can see beyond the individual (ontic) manifestations of Being to the eternality of Being.

Could it be that Balthasar’s particular use of the *analogia entis* betrays not an onto-theological edifice, but an eschatological “horizon” of Being to which Being belongs and which belongs to Being, disclosed through the divine-human theo-drama? Heidegger’s great insight was an understanding of Being not as presence but as time or temporality— as possibility, a condition into which we are “thrown” (*Geworfen*) and out of which we must make hermeneutical sense. Balthasar’s thought takes this “projected” quality of Heidegger’s understanding of *Dasein*—human “being-there”—and reorients it in a theological direction. Both Balthasar and Heidegger are interested in tracing the genealogy of Being back to its source and origin—but diverge at the crucial point where this origin must be named.\(^{174}\)

\(^{174}\) Matthew A. Daigler, “Heidegger and von Balthasar: A Lovers’ Quarrel over
As in Heidegger’s radical anti-philosophy, both Being and the artistic “form” are best described in terms of a total, unfathomable “openness.” For both thinkers, it is not just the case that art originates from the “openness” of human beings to the divine; rather, this openness is met by the opening—the disclosure, through the artwork—of Being, and ultimately for Balthasar, of glory. Yet Balthasar’s ontology—the “comprehensive doctrine of being” he seeks to reconstruct by investigating anew the history of philosophy, art and literature, and the Christian Scriptures—is not a purely philosophical construct. Rather, Balthasar gives us what he famously refers to as “metaphysics with a theological point of departure.”\(^{175}\) For Balthasar, the question of Being must ultimately lead to the question of God—metaphysics and theology are closely linked, even if their paths have often diverged.

What then, of a postmetaphysical Balthasar? It is to this question, among others, to which we turn in the following chapters.

V: Art as Sensuous Presence

In a notable chapter in her recent book *Postmodern Heretics*, art historian Eleanor Heartney investigates the “physically provocative work”\(^1\) of several famous twentieth-century artists—including Carolee Schneeman, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, and Marina Abramovic—with reference to what Andrew Greeley has termed “the Catholic imagination.”\(^2\) This line of interpretation is a surprising one, for in their aesthetic practices these artists, now imitated by several new generations of practitioners,\(^3\) used their own bodies as the medium for violent and/or sexual interventions—hardly the usual domain of Catholic or Christian standards of morality. Abramovic and Burden are particularly well-known for their performative artworks which frequently took the form of self-mutilation or disfigurement, as in Burden’s *Shoot* [1971] which famously involved the artist being shot by a gun, or *Trans-Fixed* (1974) where he was crucified on the windshield of a Volkswagen Beetle. Abramovic’s early *Rhythm* pieces from the same period similarly involved bodily harm, including both self-inflicted and viewer-initiated acts of violence and sexual aggression.

Hans Urs von Balthasar is often remembered in Catholic circles as a conservative, not least because of his role in founding the conservative journal *Communio*. The

\(^1\) Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, viii.
\(^3\) See, for example, Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley’s equally infamous *Fresh Acconci* (1995).
transgressive “body art” of the 1970s thus seems to occupy precisely the opposite end of the spectrum to Balthasar’s cultural and religious sensibilities, particularly when one recalls the response of conservative Catholic groups (such as the Catholic League) to the perceived immorality of such radically violent and sexual artworks. Yet as Heartney points out, there are deeply Catholic sensibilities which connect not only these particular post-Catholic artists but all practitioners of body-related art to the rich and complex paradigm of embodiment and enfleshment native to the Christian theological and liturgical tradition. For Heartney, these artists help recover a theology of the body as itself a medium for imagination and ritual, a sacramental, incarnational aesthetic with room for both the sacred and the profane.

Michael P. Murphy has thus posited a link between the “incarnational consciousness” Heartney discerns in these and other postmodern artists and Balthasar’s implicit theology of the body, particularly as given eschatological articulation in _Theo-Drama_. For Balthasar, giving voice to a vital dimension of Catholic spirituality and worldview, theological aesthetics must always be a matter of bodily perception, where the physical world is seen (and felt) as a sacrament of the world to come. As this chapter will demonstrate, he unfolds this theology of the body both through his discussion of the human _sensorium_ and his subsequent theology of the physical and spiritual senses as centered in Christ. Balthasar often describes earthly forms with reference to the manifestation of the unmanifest—the invisible appearing in the visible so that the

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4 Murphy, 120. The “theology of the body” which has emerged in Catholic theology owes much to Pope John Paul II and his teaching on this matter.
“form” itself is an expression of the “depths.” The body, with the activity of the senses (aisthesis) as its mode of encounter with the world and with revelation, is the locus of this experiencing (“beholding”) of form. Thus, as Heartney suggests, artists are right to remind us of the body both in its wholeness and debasement—even in violence and transgression—for the body is not only our natural habitat as creatures, but in the Incarnation “the human body is the instrument through which the miracle of man’s salvation from sin is accomplished”—precisely through the broken, mutilated, and aesthetically available “form” of Christ.\(^5\)

### Phenomenology and the Body

In the previous two chapters, I contended that Balthasar’s ontological and theological approach to the “origin” of the work of art yields a renewed phenomenology which, after Heidegger, connects the work of art to the disclosure of Being. This chapter continues this argument by highlighting Balthasar’s distinctive emphasis on the human sensorium, understood in anti-Gnostic terms as a valuation of the body and the flesh. The disclosure of Being which occurs through the form is above all, for Balthasar, a matter of sensory aisthesis (perception)—whether one is speaking of ‘secular’ art or of Christian revelation, the object of theological aesthetics. This chapter thus aims to underscore Balthasar’s value for a theology of immanence through the arts, and (in the

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\(^5\) Heartney, quoted in Murphy, 119.
vein of Heartney and Murphy) assert his relevance for contemporary art which uses the body as its medium.

Ever since Aristotle, continuing through figures such as Hegel, and down to the strand of the twentieth-century phenomenological tradition typified by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Mikel Dufrenne, the work of art has been described in the language of “sensuous presence.” I contend that Balthasar’s extensive and distinctive treatment of the human senses, both physical and “spiritual,” demonstrates his keen interest in a deeply embodied theological aesthetics and accordingly an “incarnational metaphysics” shaped by the Word made flesh. This movement of bodily interpretation goes two ways. Like the work of art, the incarnate form of Christ exercises a sensuous presence over the beholder. Concurrently, since all earthly forms are ontologically and eschatologically related to Christ, an understanding of the crucified and buried form (the body [Korper] of Christ) cannot help but carry over to an understanding of artistic form. In Balthasar’s work, moreover, the act of spiritual perception, characterized by a deeply sensuous typology of “vision” and “rapture,” becomes itself cruciform, aesthetic perception ‘inverted’ by the “dark night” of apophaticism. This is Balthasar’s mystical language of the “crucifixion of the senses.” I connect this underestimated priority in Balthasar’s thought with some currents in continental philosophy of religion, particularly the Merleau-Ponty-inspired work of Richard Kearney, Jean-Luc Marion, and John Panteleimon Manoussakis, in order to point towards the way in which Balthasar’s
theological aesthetics help restore “sacramental senses” able to guard against the de-incarnate aesthetics which result from a deficient, docetic Christology.

This exploration is a natural continuation of the previous chapters, for the proper relationship (proportio) between the sensuous “appearance” (phainesthai) and the transcendental (Truth, Goodness, Beauty) at the heart of Being is the germ of a Balthasarian phenomenology of art.

**Form and Aisthesis**

As is outlined in the preceding chapters, the concept Balthasar employs to describe the “primal phenomenon” which is neither ‘just’ an earthly, concrete event, nor an otherworldly abstraction, is “form” (Gestalt), which may also be translated as “figure” or “shape.” As we have seen, the language of indissoluble, expressive form which pervades the theological aesthetics is derived of course from the work of art, ‘formed’ by a master artist: Balthasar defines form in terms of “the gathering and uniting of that which had been indifferently scattered” and simultaneously “the outpouring, self-utterance of the one who was able to fashion by himself such a body of expression.” All form is thus, in the final analysis, deeply analogous to artistic form, the wrestling of truth not from a void or vacuum but from the “depths of reality”—a concrete manifestation

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6 GL1, 20.
7 “Theology and Aesthetic,” 63.
8 GL1, 20.
of the artists’ expression which takes on its own ‘inevitable’ Gestalt. The artist
encounters the multiplicity of Being and folds it into her own creative shape. There is
thus a close link between the creative, forming power of God and the role of human
artists as co- or sub-creators—as in Heidegger, the origin of the work of art is not just
the human agent, but irrupts from a deeper source.

Phenomenologically, then, form (both artistic and natural) is the vehicle of the
“manifestation and bestowal” of Being.\(^9\) As Hegel observed, art is precisely the creation
of “sensuous images, which address themselves at once to the senses and to the
mind.”\(^{10}\) Balthasar gives this language of sense a theological articulation which moves it
beyond a Hegelian spiraling towards disembodied philosophy and rather grounds the
physical, sensual form in relation to the incarnate form of Christ—a move with
considerable implications for a theology of art.

In *God After Metaphysics*, John Panteleimon Manoussakis succinctly defines theological
aesthetics as “precisely that field which Kant’s ‘Transcendental Aesthetics’ had always
excluded: that field [which] would consider God as a possible “object” of experience,”
available to the senses—the original and more primary meaning of the Greek
*aisthanomai*.\(^{11}\) Manoussakis’ book, which is equally indebted to Balthasar and
contemporary phenomenologists like Richard Kearney and Jean-Luc Marion, serves as a

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\(^9\) *GL*, 118.

\(^{10}\) Hegel, *Aesthetics* I.

\(^{11}\) John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *God After Metaphysics: A Theological
potent reminder that theological aesthetics is not so much about the science of aesthetics *per se* as it is a reflection on the Incarnation—that event whereby God was revealed in touchable, perceivable flesh. For it is only in the context of the phenomenal appearance in the medium of flesh that Balthasar’s “double movement” of *vision* and *rapture*—centred on the attractiveness of the form and the erotic response of the subject—makes “sense.” “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,” writes the apostle John, but Christ is also touched, audibly heard, even tasted. A phenomenology of the Incarnation such as Balthasar offers describes a situation where transcendence is thoroughly bound up with immanence, perhaps (in postmodern fashion) to such a point that the question of a hidden, invisible God is suspended.

Balthasar is not, strictly speaking, a philosopher of immanence. In fact, at first blush his approach seems to trade in precisely the metaphysical language dismantled by Heidegger and Derrida, moving in the opposite direction of John Caputo’s “weak theology” and Vattimo’s “weak” ontology towards a magnificent, and thus deconstructible, theological system—a theology of glory, as in the famous distinction.\(^\text{12}\)

However, unlike some twentieth-century theologians, Balthasar’s theology of the Incarnation takes embodiment, perception, and the immanent seriously. We can thus speak of an “incarnational metaphysics” in Balthasar’s thought as a theological

\(^{12}\)See Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) for the classic formulation of the difference between *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis.*
anthropology where sensation itself is “ensouled” and the sensual world of immanence itself is where the divine Logos is manifested.\(^\text{13}\)

For Balthasar, Christ appears in the flesh (in a physical body \(\text{Körper}\)\(^\text{14}\)), in marked contrast to docetic christologies in which the Word only appears to be clothed in human being. As a result, beholding the unique form of Christ—which in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics is consistently compared to the experience of a work of art—becomes a matter of simultaneously sensual and suprasensual experience. Balthasar’s “renewed” phenomenological approach thus here invites comparison with not only Hegel but, to take just one example from the phenomenological tradition, the work of Mikel Dufrenne, whose accent is on the artwork’s ability to “exert a sensuous presence” over the viewing subject.\(^\text{15}\) Like Balthasar, Dufrenne sought a return to the original Greek meaning of \textit{aisthesis} beyond the superficial sense given to the term in modernist aesthetics.

The being of the work of art yields itself only through its sensuous presence, which allows me to apprehend it as an aesthetic object... For those to whom it appears, the work’s being is that of a sensuous presence which is inexhaustible: a being whose reality is uncontestable but whose truth, tied to appearance, is

\(^{13}\) Stephen Fields, “Balthasar and Rahner on the spiritual senses,” \textit{Theological Studies} 57:2 (1996): 224. “Sensation can function as a religious medium, therefore, precisely because the entire sensible world has been rendered ‘a monstrance of God’s real presence.”

\(^{14}\) Murphy, 120.

\(^{15}\) Linda Stratford, “Challenge to a National School at Risk: Mikel Dufrenne’s \textit{The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience} (1953),” \textit{Analecta Husserliana} 81 (2004): 129-139.
ungraspable. It is a being for which appearance is a requirement, since it cannot find its truth elsewhere.¹⁶

Truth appears in the artwork—in Heidegger’s terms, it set-itself-to-work—precisely in its aesthetic appearance, which is to say its manifestation to the senses. Both the “sensing” and the “sensed” comprise the action of the “sensuous” on the viewer.¹⁷ Hegel wrote of the way in which art is necessary because it represents the idea back to itself, a kind of redoubling of the abstract in the particular, the ideal in the sensuous.¹⁸ Dufrenne pushes this one step further by locating the ineffable, ungraspable quality of the artwork in its sensuous appearance—in Hegelian terms, its “address” to the senses. Applied to christology, the supreme aesthetic “form” of Christ is not graspable by trying to get ‘behind’ it to a non-incarnate meaning. As Balthasar points out in his section on Irenaeus, this was precisely what the Valentinian Gnostics sought to do by making the Christ-event into a symbol of an abstract crucifixion, in the form of the horos or limit.¹⁹ Such a de-incarnate theology makes the historical body of Christ redundant—the physical form is only a shadow of the immaterial. For Balthasar, countering such views, the Christ-form as perceptible in history—in other words, as inscribed in flesh—is an aesthetically compelling sensuous presence in the world which transforms the senses of those who behold it. One cannot spiritualize this ultimate phenomenal appearance

¹⁶ Mikel Dufrenne, The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 44.
¹⁸ Hegel, Aesthetics.
¹⁹ GL2.
without doing violence to the embodied, incarnate metaphysics of the Christ-event.

There is thus a sacramental resonance to Balthasar’s incarnational metaphysics—Christ confronts humanity in the domain of the senses, the invisible in the visible, made available (supremely in the Eucharist!) to touch and taste.

Sensuous Knowledge and Epiphany

Before expanding on Balthasar’s understanding of the role of the senses and their connection to art and revelation, it is helpful to rehearse his overall approach to theological *aesthesis*—what he calls in one section of *The Glory of the Lord* his “doctrine of Christian perception.” As we saw in Chapter 3, for the Greeks, to perceive beauty in a work of art or beautiful figure was to be wounded or “broken open” to the gods—taken up by the appearance to “transcendental” Beauty, Truth and Goodness. This epiphanic account of art and beauty is the starting-point for the metaphysical tradition of beauty which Balthasar traces through Homer and Pindar down through Plato to the Neoplatonists. Taken up and transfigured by Christian revelation, it flows through Pseudo-Dionysius to Aquinas, Bonaventure and Eckhart (among a long list of others), and taken *in toto* forms the philosophical pathway to understanding Christian “glory.”

The potential problem with such a lofty, transcendental/metaphysical understanding of “beauty,” however, is that it can become hopelessly abstract—divorced from the concrete forms of nature and art, and so essentially meaningless. Thus, contrary to what
one might expect from a theologian, for Balthasar a “religious esthetic” is incomplete if it turns away too quickly from “all the concrete kinds of beauty immanent in the world.”\(^{20}\) The “inexhaustible” richness of beauty comes precisely from the endless “combinations” of forms in their concrete existence. The “transcendental origin” of the beautiful comes not by looking past the object, but by opening oneself to the “impact from above” (epiphaneia) in the very act of contemplating its unique form.\(^{21}\) Balthasar thus celebrates both “symmetry, proportion and harmony”—the medieval, Thomistic categories that determine the *pulchrum* or beautiful in the form itself, which as we will see in the chapter on dramatics Balthasar re-defines in Christological language—and, in resolutely Heideggerian terms, “the alternation of disclosure and concealment, in all the forms of interaction both outside and inside the erotic with its beguiling qualities.”\(^{22}\) Like the work of art, which “at the moment it ‘speaks’... also conceals its fullness,”\(^{23}\) so too revelation is a matter of both unveiling and concealment in the aesthetic realm.

No metaphysics of being qua being and of its transcendental determinations is separable from concrete experience, which is always sensuous... It is from the experience of the senses that we know that the beautiful [and the good and the true] exists: this experience makes it present to us and takes it away from us again, discloses it and conceals it in various layers of depth, freely and incomprehensibly.\(^{24}\)

\(^{20}\) “Revelation and the Beautiful,” 104.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 105.
\(^{23}\) Murphy, 128.
\(^{24}\) *GL4*, 28-29.
**Balthasar and Merleau-Ponty**

For Balthasar, metaphysics—the doctrine of Being he traces through the centuries—must be manifested in the sensuous. In this particular way his thought perhaps here comes closer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s than Heidegger’s in terms of the phenomenological tradition. For Merleau-Ponty, “the world is what we perceive.” It thus makes no sense to think Being apart from perception and embodied experience. Merleau-Ponty thus characterizes the disclosure of Being as an aesthetic event: “The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.” For Merleau-Ponty, there is no Being in abstraction—rather, Being is laid down (constructed/actualized, phenomenalized) as we experience it. Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty thus accords to the artist the universally human task of paying heed—of mindful attention to the unique contours of Being as manifested in concrete forms:

> Whether we are concerned with a thing perceived, a historical event or a doctrine, to ‘understand’ is to take in the total intention—not only what these things are for representation... but the unique mode of existing expressed in the properties of the pebble, the glass or the piece of wax, in all the events of a revolution, in all the thoughts of a philosopher.\(^{27}\)

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\(^{26}\) Ibid., xx.

\(^{27}\) *Phenomenology of Perception*, xviii.
Breaking with the dominant, ocular paradigm which has characterized much of Western thought, Merleau-Ponty does not see vision as a faculty which from a privileged, neutral position organizes the world into a “picture of representation.” Such a paradigm loses sight of the multifarious complexity of Being, and reinforces a dualist ontology where phenomena are disentangled from Being, and subject and object are walled off from one another. Rather, vision is closely linked to the other senses, which together provide human being-in-the-world: “immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees... he opens onto the world.” The body thus both “sees and is seen”—the hand both touches and is touched. This two-way dynamic of perception and apperception is, for Merleau-Ponty, critical to understanding the structure of reality and as we shall see bears similarities to Balthasar’s understanding of truth.

One other aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s thought will connect with Balthasar’s “theological” aesthetics. For Merleau-Ponty, it is also on the threshold of this dynamic system of “exchanges” that the problem of painting—the origin of the work of art—presents itself. Things and bodies are “made of the same stuff” and so the painted image “arouse[s]... a carnal formula” of its presence in the viewer’s body. Painting, to put it briefly, makes Being visible through flesh: “The painter ‘takes his body with him’” and accordingly “it is

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by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.” The artwork is thus a “sensuous presence” in that it exerts a palpable and evocative presence over the senses of the viewer and that is the manifestation of the bodily intervention of the painter; it makes the invisible visible, the two “intertwining” in complex and mutually informing ways.

The Sensorium

Balthasar’s similarity to Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenological tradition is clearly evident in his understanding of the nature of perception. Of critical importance to Balthasar’s nascent theology of art, and indeed his theological aesthetics considered as a whole, is his emphasis on the human sensorium. For Balthasar, touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing are in terms of human cognition “the sphere that is open to the world,” open “access points” which mediate between consciousness and the created environment. The ‘aesthetic’ operation of the senses (aisthesis) thus constitutes the venue in which things (and other beings) are present to us and through which we are present to them; as Balthasar observes, “it is only through the senses and in them that man perceives and acquires a sensibility for the reality of the world and of Being.” As Manoussakis writes, following Aristotle, “the body serves as the sensorium that allows

29 “Eye and Mind,” 123.
30 See discussion in “Dufrenne and the Virtual as an Aesthetic Category in Phenomenology,” 60.
31 Balthasar, GL1, 393.
32 ET2, 473.
33 Ibid.
the world and the soul to ‘touch’ each other.” Balthasar’s theological aesthetics provides a strong valuation of the bodily, "enfleshed" roots of knowledge consistent with the phenomenological imperative of integrating the preconceptual, preverbal aspects of experience (and of the object’s self-showing) into cognition.

Although the major theme of Balthasar’s seven-volume *The Glory of the Lord* is “seeing the form”—a “beholding” of the manifold forms of creation which leads on to the supreme form of Christ the *concretum universale*—it would be a mistake to think of Balthasar’s theological project as simply valuing “sight” (traditionally the “noblest sense”35) at the expense of the other bodily faculties.36 In Balthasar’s anthropology, human experience of the world is mediated by all of the five senses working in tandem; touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing are in terms of human cognition “the sphere that is open to the world.”37 Encountering the world through a multiplicity of senses allows experience to be variegated and multiperspectival—in Balthasar’s estimation, “something heard is, in the intellect, different from something that is seen, tasted, or touched.”38 For example, sight, in its essential “distance” and “clarity,” allows us to organize (and perhaps even “subordinate”) the world of phenomena with ourselves as the centred subject; in its most developed forms it allows us to penetrate the “foreign interiority” of an object or even another person, perceiving the *claritas* and *integritas* of

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34 Manoussakis, 133.  
35 *ET2*, 474.  
37 Balthasar, *GL1*, 393.  
38 *ET2*, 473.
its created form.\textsuperscript{39} Hearing, on the other hand, is a thoroughly interiorized faculty, indiscernibly “oscillating” between subject and object—it penetrates or “lays hold of” the hearer herself.\textsuperscript{40} Touch, taste and smell also exercise their unique properties as they come into contact with Being. For Balthasar, each sense contributes something valuable to cognition—the senses become the arena for our ‘graced’ experience of the created order, each intuition (in the Kantian sense) prompting the mind towards the depths of Being.\textsuperscript{41} This is a point Balthasar makes repeatedly throughout his work, not just in the aesthetics but in his theological logic as well. Thus the kind of knowing effected by the body is invaluable and fundamental to human cognition—artists are thus right to remind us, as in Andy Warhol’s famous image, to “be somebody with a body.”

However, for Balthasar the physical senses are not the sum total of the human \textit{sensorium}. Rather, the physical sensorium is amplified and extended by a spiritual sensorium, open to glory and to the Other:

Human knowledge is tied to a physical and organic sensorium. Now, there is no doubt that this tie does in fact hinder and obscure the pure spirituality of human knowing ... It is in this respect ... that the unclosing of the subject to the other’s truth is no longer a spontaneous act but the unchosen necessity of being broken open to receive, through the subspiritual gateway of the sense, the life and truth of the other that comes, uninvited, pouring into the domain of its intellect.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 474.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 477-478.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 477.  
\textsuperscript{42} TL1, 47.
The "rich, fivefold spectrum" of the sensorium is valuable not as an end in itself, but precisely because it is a gateway to the spiritual and communal dimensions of existence. The senses have a sacramental, analogical connection to the life of the spirit. In the encounter with a "form" in all its depths, the subject encounters both the richness of its physical and organic qualities and its meaningfulness—its truth—and participation in the mystery of being. This is only heightened in communion with fellow human beings, whom we encounter through our physical sensorium but come to know on a much deeper, spiritual level. Here Balthasar is in concert with a writer he greatly admired, Gabriel Marcel, who suggested the body is not an “object,” and thus the self/body cannot be thought of in strictly materialist terms; rather, bodily existence is inherently a “mysterious type of reality” which is irreducible and always-already mediated.

Balthasar’s account of the sensorium closely echoes Merleau-Ponty’s dual phenomenology of painting and bodily experience. For Balthasar, as for Merleau-Ponty, a naïvely realistic world view is one where the object exists in some abstract theoretical distance from the “space opened by the sensorium,” which amounts to a “failure to interpret and assess positively the phenomenon of appearance, which in reality gives the thing in itself its integrity and plenitude ... its radiant glory.” What gives itself in the form is not a pure abstraction, accessible to reason, but an aesthetic irruption of Being

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43 TL1, 48.
45 TL1, 65.
available to the senses. We experience things as bodies, with all our senses; our “openness” to the world is, as in Merleau-Ponty, characterized by exchange and “touching.”

This is not to say Balthasar devalues cognition. Even as a phenomenon appears to our senses, it is synthesized by the mind in the process Balthasar terms conversio ad phantasmata, the conversion to the ideal image (a term he borrows from the philosophical tradition). However, this is not to say that in its abstraction, accomplished by intuition, the object is evacuated of all tangible qualities. Rather, this conversio is what allows the object to appear in its ontological, and so sensuous, fullness. Sense and intuition are closely linked, as in Kant, together forming the substrate of cognitive knowledge. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, philosopher Paul Crowther has along these same lines described the way the embodied subject necessarily “inheres in the sensible” —for human ‘knowing’ does not precede sensorial experience, but is always-already embedded in the act of sensory aisthesis. The body has a prelinguistic, “primordial awareness” of its surroundings which connects the human being to the touched, seen, and otherwise intuited surfaces of the world, yielding a kind of “ontological reciprocity” with the environment. Thinking occurs in precisely this realm—concrete data about the world and reflection upon it, which Kant parsed out into two different types of

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aesthetic reflection, occur simultaneously. Being-in-the-world always involves a
synthetic process of both encounter and abstraction.

Senses and Revelation

It is thus natural that Christian experience of God, which occurs precisely in this sensual
environment, cannot be “spiritualized” into vague abstraction. For Balthasar, keenly
aware of the aesthetic dimensions of human experience, “everything depends on the
effects of hearing, seeing and, especially, touching the Word of Life.” In the context of
the Church, this spiritual aisthesis is mediated through the living ‘stream’ of tradition. As
we receive the substance of faith passed down through the ages, we “hear,” “see,” and
“touch,” and in the Eucharist we “taste” the Word made flesh; this rich “sensory
color character of faith” extends even to the fragrant smells and ‘tactile’ symbolism of the
liturgy. The aroma of incense, the stripping of the altar on Good Friday, the act of
consuming the communion wafer—these aesthetic components of the life of the Church
do not just accompany the Christian tradition (as if the “core” of faith was a series of
verbal propositions) but are in fact constitutive elements of the living tradition which,
precisely in their sensual character, are ‘received’ by individual believers.

48 GL1, 313.
49 Ibid., 316.
50 Ibid., 307.
As has been said, another key influence on Balthasar’s renewed phenomenology is the French thinker Gabriel Marcel. In *The Mystery of Being*, Marcel argues for an expanded understanding of the process of thinking as “participation-feeling,” embracing the sensory, affective, and above all intersubjective dimensions of knowledge (*connaissance*, as practiced by *connoisseurs*) above and beyond the realm of pure reason. For Marcel, “The artist alone… really participates in the reality of life. Contemplation thus appears as a mode of participation, the highest of all.”51 This points to the role of artists in helping recover *aisthesis*—for the concept of the *sensorium* is of critical importance for Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. The aim of his project is precisely to rehabilitate the lost “sense” of glory, which is preserved as much (and perhaps even more so) in the poets as by theologians. Tracing back the history of glory means opening one’s senses to both philosophical and artistic glimpses of the glory of Christian revelation. Artists, insofar as they immerse us more deeply into the world of the senses, drive us more closely to revelation which occurs precisely in the sphere of the senses. Recovering a physical sensorium—our variegated senses of touch, of sight, and hearing—reconnects us to the world in which God speaks and appears in the flesh.

**The Spiritual Senses**

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51 Marcel, xi.
It is important to clarify the relationship between the physical and spiritual sensoria in Balthasar’s thought.\(^{52}\) In particular, it is crucial to remember that Balthasar’s understanding of the “spiritual senses” is not just a capitulation to modern phenomenological method but the retrieval of an oft-neglected aspect of ecclesial and mystical tradition. In an attempt to trace the genealogy of the “spiritual senses,” Balthasar charts their evolution from Origen through to the medieval period, where the spiritual senses were related to the “mystical and intuitive experience of God”—the “seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling of the soul.”\(^{53}\) However, Balthasar suggests that over time the unique functions of the five “spiritual senses” were reassigned to the intellect and subsumed into the general category of “contemplative mysticism”—a non-aesthetic, largely apophatic “unity without modes.”\(^{54}\) The “spiritual senses” were only recovered by Ignatius Loyola, who taught his followers to “apply the senses” to prayer, training their imaginations and affections to be “attuned” to enter into the “drama” of biblical narrative and imagery. Ignatius encouraged those undertaking the Exercises to imaginatively insert themselves into the Gospel stories and other scenes from the Scriptures, involving all of their senses in this contemplative recreation. Highlighting the free analogical interchange between “spiritual” and “physical” senses, such ‘sensory’ prayer is “an interior realization of the objective mystery of

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\(^{52}\) For an excellent, comprehensive study of Balthasar’s treatment of the spiritual senses, see Mark McInroy, *Balthasar on the ‘spiritual senses’: perceiving splendor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

\(^{53}\) See *GL1*, 365-378.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
salvation which transforms even the sensory disposition.”\textsuperscript{55} Here we see aspects of what Balthasar eventually terms “archetypal experience”: Christ and Mary emerge as the prototypical and normative examples of the proper function of the earthly senses. “Spiritual senses... presuppose devout bodily senses which are capable of undergoing Christian transformation by coming to resemble the sensibility of Christ and Mary.”\textsuperscript{56}

Balthasar’s incarnational metaphysics, therefore, rely on faith. Just as the eye of faith necessary to see the form of revelation is given by grace from the radiant form itself, so the senses are “spiritualized” in encountering Christ in the world of the senses.\textsuperscript{57} Balthasar’s approach can thus be contrasted with that of Karl Rahner, whose appropriation of the “spiritual senses” is attuned more to Being as such rather than christologically developed. It is not that our senses raise us to the divine because of their intrinsic qualities, but because revelation has occurred in the sphere of the sensible, a phenomenology of revelation is possible which elevates sensation to the divine.\textsuperscript{58} The immanence of the Incarnation itself means that “sensible forms are redeemed.”\textsuperscript{59}

Balthasar, drawing on the riches of Ignatian spirituality, has as a major theme of his theological aesthetics, the understanding that the physical and spiritual “senses,” rather than being opposed as in Origen’s typology, analogically pass over into one another

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 375. 
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 378. 
\textsuperscript{57} Fields, 224. 
\textsuperscript{58} Fields, 224. 
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
“without any rupture or inversion.”\(^{60}\) [Manoussakis calls Origen’s account of the spiritual senses a “de-incarnational” model.\(^{61}\)] In clarifying the nature of the deterioration of the sensorium for glory in contemporary theology, one way of stating the problem without sundering these layers of “sensibility” is to suggest that the Church finds itself in an impoverished spiritual and aesthetic condition with regard to what one might call, to adopt Dufrenne’s terminology, the “sensuous presence” of the Christ-form. Like the sensuous manifold in Kant’s philosophy, the world of appearances presents itself to cognition not as an arrangement of discrete objects that are objectively ‘seen’ and structured by one organizing, ratiocinating sense (i.e. vision). Instead, phenomena engage intuition as a complex field of phenomena, simultaneously engaging all of our senses (and subjectivities) in the act of aesthetic perception. To lose sight of this complex, simultaneously sensual and spiritual address (the “call” \([kaleo]\) of beauty) is to fail to “see the form.” There is, as Mark McInroy persuasively argues of Balthasar’s treatment of the spiritual senses, an important sense in Balthasar’s project that all perception of earthly forms must be at once “sensory and supersensory.”\(^{62}\) In other words, \textit{all} human perception “exceeds the material realm,”\(^{63}\) and it is precisely this phenomenological excess which calls out for a doctrine of perception shaped by incarnational and theo-logical categories.

\(^{60}\) \textit{ET}2, 478.  
\(^{61}\) Manoussakis, 147.  
\(^{62}\) McInroy, 13.  
\(^{63}\) Ibid.
Here again a helpful analogy is the Balthasarian horizon of the work of art. Art theorist Paul Crowther employs the term “sensuous manifold” in defining the nature of a work of art, pointing to the way the individual painting, film or sculpture functions as a ‘manifold of sensations’ rather than a solely visual stimulus, addressing itself synaesthetically to all of our embodied and spiritual faculties. If revelation itself, like the work of art, is not just a set of propositions but a kind of “sensuous manifold,” true theology is thus a matter of integrative aisthesis or sensory perception—the simultaneous redemption of all our physical and spiritual sensibilities so they may “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). This does not elevate experience of art (or of nature) to a salvific level on its own—though creation can be thought of sacramentally, the fullness of sacramental mediation is in the church, the body of Christ. Bringing things full circle, this subsequently makes possible a key aspect of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics—broadening theology itself to include awareness of the lost countenance of Beauty alongside the other transcendentals of Truth and Goodness. Conceiving of tradition itself as a type of many-layered “aesthetic” phenomenon also underscores the unique “confronting” of man’s senses that happens in the Incarnation—the open “sphere of the senses” is suddenly overwhelmed by the immanent, fleshly presence of the Word, the confounding “form” which the Church mediates through its resources over the centuries, ever making new this revelation for those who have “eyes to see.” The multisensory nature of our experience of not only the world but of the

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64 There is not sufficient space here to trace the genealogy of this term and its deployment in contemporary aesthetics. For a way into the discussion in the context of art theory, see Crowther, Art and Embodiment.
Word proclaimed by and through the Church is a critical dimension of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics as they play out in the ecclesial setting.

The Event of the Beautiful

This model provides insight into the nature of the dulling of the senses which happens for Balthasar in the modern age. As already stated, Balthasar suggests *contra* Origen that the physical senses open up onto the “spiritual senses” in an analogical manner—that in the spiritual realm “there is something that corresponds to the clear and objective act of seeing, something else that corresponds to the mode of hearing and being affected, and something else again that corresponds to the perception of smell and of taste or to the blind awareness of touch that nevertheless brings certainty and is blessed.”65 Each of the senses reveals a new perspective on the concrete content of revelation, and so to lose even one of these senses is to be “blind” or “deaf” to an entire avenue of revelatory mediation. Balthasar’s construal of the analogical relationship between physical and spiritual senses unfolds this theme with recourse to the thought of Romano Guardini, who wrote of the way in which “corporeal” senses are what provide the raw material “out of which” the Spirit forms the spiritual “eye” which can see God – namely, the eyes of faith, which are developed in the Church.66 This way of relating the sensory and spiritual is consistent with the Hebraic biblical paradigm which finds the “essence” of the human being in “concrete and indivisible wholeness.”

65 ET2, 477.
66 GL1, 392.
including sense experience; rather than a Gnostic/Hellenistic dualism, the human being experiences world and God “with both body and soul,” acting in harmony. Balthasar is also indebted here to the Ignatian concept of a lived “attunement” (Stimmung) between the Christian subject and their environment. However, much caution must be exercised. The “profane human senses,” in “making possible the act of faith,” are transfigured into the “spiritual senses”; but a danger which surfaces is to thus mistakenly suggest Christianity is merely an “aesthetic-mystical” religion where the sensory and the spiritual are coterminous.67

As already stated, the Incarnation manifests itself in the world of sense and beauty; this appearance of the Word made flesh “in our midst” leads to the paradoxical formulation whereby the corporeal “senses perceive the non-sensual sensually.” Here we see a Barthian emphasis on the inbreaking of the alien Word complemented by Balthasar’s concern for the mediation of the divine through the aesthetic: “God brings man to a halt by confronting him through his Incarnation in the midst of the sphere of the senses. God confronts man as the neighbour that no one can avoid, and yet also as the Lord and Master before whom man must bow—precisely because man can see, touch, hear and eat him.”68

Such an understanding of the nature of the revelation of Christ is related to Balthasar’s overarching concern with the critical transition from the “subjective experience” of faith

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67 Ibid., 365-66.
68 GL1, 406.
(theological *aisthesis*) to the “objective evidence” of divine self-disclosure. “God’s human and sensory appearance in Christ could be reciprocated only by a hidden perception and response on the part of man”; yet this “hidden perception” is already a “subjective echo” of the “objective fact” of revelation.\(^6^9\)

Applied to art, then, we are given a theological imperative to experience "truth" and "beauty" not just with our minds, but with the full range of perceptual resources accorded us by our bodies. Balthasar thus paves the way for an incarnational theology of the experience of art. This reinforces the importance of the concrete and particular in our physical and spiritual experience of beauty. The meaning of the work of art comes in the interplay between the senses and the *conversio ad phantasmata*: “Where man is concerned, however, this birth of language never takes place in the “purely spiritual” realm above sensory “phenomena” but essentially in his ability to read a form apprehended by the senses. In creation’s world of the senses, the word has always become flesh.”\(^7^0\)

As we have seen in previous chapters, the primary dialectic at the heart of Balthasar’s phenomenology of the aesthetic is the polarity between the “event” (*Ereignis*) of disclosure (of beauty, truth, etc.) which occurs in the “appearance” of the form, and the

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 365.

\(^{70}\) *TD2*, 25.
analogy of being which ‘tethers’ this irruption to Being itself.\textsuperscript{71} Defined with reference to Beauty, the “first word” which Balthasar takes up in search of an adequate theological aesthetics, Balthasar’s main concern is to illustrate along with ancient metaphysicians that “the beauty that blazes forth in single acts of appearing,” while still an irrepeatable, spontaneous “happening” in its own right, is nonetheless “anchored in an absolute beauty that does not pass away, a beauty that dwells in the whole archai of being.”\textsuperscript{72}

What Balthasar thus terms, following the Protestant theologian Gerhard Nebel, the “event of the beautiful” (\textit{Das Ereignis des Schönen}) emerges in connection with his retrieval of ancient (Greek) metaphysics. For Balthasar, metaphysics must not be detached from “concrete experience,” from the “sensuous” presence of an individual form—it is not “laid down” by the senses, as in Merleau-Ponty, but neither does it exist in abstraction from them. In Gerhard Nebel’s thought, as appropriated by Balthasar, the form, even a seemingly ugly figure, “discloses” and “conceals” the beautiful as it presents itself to our senses—subsequently, there is a sudden, unexpected and transformative “event” (\textit{Ereignis}) whereby one beholds the “secret beauty” of things.\textsuperscript{73}

The “event of the beautiful” operative in the work of art is moreover the event of truth – where the true, uncontainably excessive self-showing of the thing irrupts in our midst.

\textsuperscript{72} GL4, 19.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 29.
As stated in chapter 2, Balthasar’s thought diverges from Nebel’s in the maintaining of the *analogia entis*, an “analogy” which bridges the ontological difference, forming an indissoluble relationship between individual existents (i.e. forms) and the mystery of Being. Balthasar, following Erich Przywara, saw the *analogia entis* as a crucial component of a comprehensive Catholic doctrine of being—a dynamic structure of continual outflow which extends beyond the singular “event” to the cascading nature of Being itself. It situates the transcendentals (Truth, Beauty, Goodness) in right relation to earthly instantiations of the same, preserving the integrity of Being and of the individual form through the *maior dissimilitudino* inherent to such an analogical relationship. For Nebel, on the other hand, “the *analogia entis* remains on the plane of the event” when it comes to the sudden appearance of the beautiful in a particular form—the unique beauty of the Christ-event, for example, is singular and arresting, yet it does not open out onto “transcendental” Beauty. In Protestant, immanent fashion, earthly beauty does not correspond or participate in a heavenly or transcendent Beauty, even through analogy, and the appearance of the beautiful is construed as a spontaneous happening—in fact, this “event”-quality is what gives it its incredible force. This, for Balthasar, will not suffice as an account of Being or divine revelation—for him, the “event” of the beautiful must be construed “transcendentally,” which is to say defined in relation to God’s “self-revelation in history and in the Incarnation.”

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74 “Revelation and the Beautiful,” 107.
75 “Revelation and the Beautiful,” 106-107; GL1, 56-57.
However, Balthasar also recognizes the opposite danger, to which Nebel’s thought serves as an important counterweight: the tendency to forget the “concrete,” sensuous nature of the event (and its ‘eventmentality,’ in the language of Jean-Luc Marion) of the beautiful in pursuit of the shining “light” of the transcendentals. For Balthasar, both “coming to be” and “being”—both the “immanent object” and the “transcendent event”—must be held in tension. The analogy of being is not a matter of static essences, but of constantly flowing relationality.

To existentialize beauty on theological grounds would be to prevent its incorporation into the structure of essences, of subjects and objects and their intertwining. We would then be deprived of the possibility of attaining, from our contact with any pure essence, a flower for example, to a genuine original experience of beauty which, through its religious roots, might reach to the same depth of reality as the great mythology brought to birth at its due time in history.

A recovery of the “irreducibly particular” and the “original experience of beauty” is precisely the reason for the high regard Balthasar gives the poet (and Jesuit convert) Gerard Manley Hopkins. The concrete, evocative poetic language in which the poet describes the wonders of “wild” nature discloses the distinct sense that “in the unique, the irreducible, there shines forth for Hopkins the glory of God.” Moreover, all beauty “belongs” to Christ, is “related” to him and is “yielded” back to him. Christ is at the

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77 “Revelation and the Beautiful,” 108.
78 Ibid.
79 GL3, 357.
80 Ibid., 386.
centre of human culture, and yet transposes it to a higher key. This affects the way we conceive of aisthesis—the centrality of Christ himself (not just God as an abstraction) enables a richer and more “exact experiencing of the forms of the world.” Hopkins discovered “inscapes” of inexhaustible depth by considering earthly forms in their concrete, contingent existence—the clouds, trees, all “freckled” and “dappled” things. A truly Christian approach to aesthetics eschews “universal, abstract truths” in favour of “images,” experiencing space and time in their particularity and complexity. The poet, insofar as she makes these images more clear, thus provides an “appropriate theological language.”

Secular Transcendence

This “transcendence-in-immanence” has immense implications for a contemporary theology of art. New Testament scholar and theologian Amos Wilder’s 1964 article “Art and Theological Meaning” describes the necessity of openness to what he calls, drawing on filmmaker Jean Cocteau as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the “secular transcendence” or “lay mystery” in modern culture. “If we are to have any transcendence today, even Christian, it must be in and through the secular.” Art, for Wilder, as for Merleau-Ponty, provides the opportunity for just such a transcendence-in-immanence, for the work of

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81 Ibid.
the artist is enmeshed in the "primordial givens" of human sensation and desire—phenomena already containing the seed of transcendence. In *Theopoetic* (1976), Wilder again draws attention to the ability of the arts to immerse the subject in a "heightened awareness of the elements of perception," uniquely disclosing the "wonder of what is immediately presented to consciousness in touch, sight, and sound." For Wilder, a robust “aesthetic” must always be rooted in what he calls the “World’s Body,” a phrase taken from the poet John Crowe Ransom but which could equally come from Merleau-Ponty—in embodied, sensory engagement with the real world in its wondrous complexity. The painter paints in the world of the flesh in order to redeem it— as Murphy notes, even the work of art can be an *expressio* of divine presence.

**Flesh**

If we are to speak of the senses and the sensuous, we must also speak of the flesh. For Balthasar, the term "flesh" in the Scriptures invokes a kind of "realism": "Paul does not mean only the purely corporeal dimension of man; he also includes, without exception, his reason and thought, insofar as they are not sustained and guided upward by grace (*pneuma)*." Flesh is transitory, and a "deep shadow" falls on it in both the Old Testament and Greek philosophy. The Word, however, assumes flesh "in order to take

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85 Murphy.  
86 *TL2*, 223.
up his dwelling in it forever," the ultimate valuation (contra the Greeks) of its value. Balthasar criticizes both Aquinas and Augustine for positing the body as only the "forestage" of the spirit - "background noises" which distract from the primacy of divinized flesh. He rather looks to Irenaeus as the one whose theology of the Incarnation manifests the Word spoken to "all flesh." Significantly, this for Balthasar has a eucharistic significance. The Word becomes flesh in order to raise a sacrifice out of weakness. This openness of the flesh is what Balthasar terms the "chalice character" of human flesh. Open to the transcendent, and permeable so that the spiritual and physical can work together (without commingling), the human body thus becomes a locus of revelation.

**Theological Anaesthesis**

Balthasar’s aim at the end of the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord* is to outline a robust “doctrine of Christian perception”—a mode of “seeing the form” shaped by its subject matter (the confluence of “form” and “content”). Moreover, as we have seen Balthasar insists that the physical and spiritual “senses,” rather than being opposed as in Origen’s typology, analogically pass over into one another “without any rupture or inversion.” In this vein, he emphasizes the unique (and Barthian) “confronting” of man’s senses that happens in the Incarnation – the open “sphere of the senses” is

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87 Ibid., 225.  
88 Ibid., 226.  
89 Ibid., 229.  
90 *ET2*, 478.
suddenly overwhelmed by the immanent, fleshly presence of the Word, the
confounding “form” which the Church mediates through its resources over the
centuries. Yet there is still a question to be asked here about the transition from the
physical sensorium to a “supersensory” sensorium attuned to glory. This is where
Balthasar introduces the idea of a crucifixion of the senses, a theodramatic reversal
which, in the case of the aesthetic, manifests itself as a resurrection not only to Being
but to glory.

What Balthasar has in mind here is the apophatic tradition of mystical ascent—the
Carmelite progression through the purgative, illuminative, and unitive states or “ways.”
There is, particularly in the dark night of the soul described by John of the Cross, a
purgation or purification of the senses. 91 For John, one may know the “aridity” of the
dark night in that even as the “strength of the senses” is transferred to the spirit, the
physical senses become “barren, dry, and empty”: “For the sensual part of a man has no
capacity for that which is pure spirit, and thus, when it is the spirit that receives
pleasure, the flesh is left without savour and is too weak to perform any action.” 92

The “strangeness of the exchange” between physical and spiritual senses is for John of
the Cross an ascetic, apophatic moment—mystical darkness. 93 It is thus clear that in the

92 Ibid., 33.
93 Pseudo-Dionysius is the theologian credited with the term “dazzling darkness,”
but it also has antecedents in Gregory of Nyssa.
overall context of Balthasar’s thought, aisthesis (perception, or “beholding”) means “conformity to Christ” shaped by the central theodramatic events of the cross and Holy Saturday. This is the great paradox and reversal at the heart of Balthasar’s theoaesthetics—the “form” becomes “formless,” the Word “descends into darkness,” and the terrifying silence of the crucified one on the Cross is extended into a profound experience of divine abandonment:

Even the Logos, who assumed the form appropriate to him, must lose his shape... God’s Word in the world has fallen silent; he does not even ask in the night for God; he is laid out in the ground. The night that arches above him is no night of stars, but a night of dull distress and self-alienation in death... the silence of absence, of turning away, of empty abandonment, which comes after all the agonies of leave-taking.94

Here, then, is the paradigm for genuine archetypal aisthesis. Beheld with the “spiritual senses,” Balthasar’s account of Holy Saturday enables the christological formula “one died for all, and therefore all died” (2 Cor. 5:14) to take on a new meaning for the Christian, who finds himself in radical solidarity with Christ the “form of forms” even in his experience of self-alienation and darkness; before one can rise with Christ, one must die with him. For Balthasar, taking his cue from the mystic Adrienne von Speyr as well as the German mystical tradition, the “centre of all Christology” is Christ’s own total experience of death and alienation from God – what Balthasar terms the unique “hiatus” of the tomb, Christ’s “going to the dead” as a continuation of the kenotic

redemption of the Cross. Rather than the traditional patristic image of the triumphant Christ’s “descent” into Hell in order to shatter its gates and vanquish the powers of evil – the *descensus ad infera* implied in the creeds (and Orthodox iconography) – Balthasar offers the image of the dead Christ “being with the dead,” a passive “ultimate solidarity” which immerses him fully in the human experience of death and even damnation.

Balthasar’s doctrine of Holy Saturday may thus be said to be *anaesthetic* or “insensible” in that it involves a great reversal of theological aesthetics, the perfect “form” becoming ‘formless’ as he absorbs into himself the fullness of Hell and ‘senseless’ as he is plunged into the darkness of death. The eternal Word falls silent; he is rendered “blind” and “deaf” in the abyss of the underworld.

John Manoussakis, in his discussion of the spiritual senses, eschews Origen’s term and thus speaks rather of *sacramental senses* which are only made possible in relation to “the event of the Incarnation.” This sacramental experience is not just an individual, mystical *aisthesis* but is normative for the whole church. Although Balthasar’s central ecclesiological image is nuptial, the Marian figure of the Mother-Bride, here his focus is on the Body in conformity to Christ its Head: “At the end of the Passion, when the Word of God is dead, the Church has no words left to say. While the grain of corn is dying,

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96 Ibid., 164.
97 Manoussakis, 150-151.
there is nothing to harvest.” 98 This ‘anaesthetic’ reality on the part of the dead Christ renders the Word of God “mute,” and thus the Church itself becomes “insensible,” “deaf” to the kerygma and deprived (as in exile) of the presence of the Spirit. “In the same way that a man who undergoes death and burial is mute, no longer communicating or transmitting anything, so it is with this man Jesus, who was the Speech, the Communication and the Mediation of God. He dies, and what it was about his life that made it revelation breaks off.” 99

Balthasar is careful not to simply insert the Church into the unique kenosis of Christ. Yet there is a palpable sense of ecclesial participation in a “senseless” faith, cut off from beauty as the lowest point in the grand movement of death and resurrection:

In the Christian sphere, the death and the burial of God within this sensory world correspond to conceptual and mystical abstraction: man’s senses and his reason are equally affected by them, and ‘naked faith’ is in this respect a total death of natural man. But once the Christian has risen with Christ and ascended to the Father, then, with body and spirit, he has become a ‘spiritual man’... he has not only a spiritual intellect and will, but also a spiritual heart, a spiritual imagination and spiritual senses. 100

Death to the “physical” senses is the necessary precondition for the reception of new, spiritual senses: in keeping with the apophatic mysticism espoused by such diverse figures as Gregory of Nyssa and John of the Cross, the corporeal eye is made “blind” so that the spiritual eye may see, and similarly “new hearing” is mysteriously bequeathed

98 Mysterium Paschale, 50.
99 Ibid.
100 GL1, 366.
“to what must be made deaf.” Here *epektasis* towards the divine crosses the analogical divide between the two types of sense, corporeal and incorporeal, “physical” and “spiritual.” Intriguingly, though Balthasar suggests *contra* Origen that the five physical senses are not fundamentally opposed but pass analogically upward to the spiritual senses, he still makes a place in his account of “Christian perception” for this kind of purificatory asceticism, again tied experientially (and archetypally) to the death of Christ: “For our senses, together with images and thoughts, must die with Christ and descend to the underworld in order then to rise unto the Father in an unspeakable manner which is both sensory and suprasensory.”

**Art and Death**

If such a passage from the sensory to the suprasensory is necessary, perhaps art can play a role in engendering this kind of “seeing.” For Balthasar, if we are seeking to define the glory which surpasses or “outstrips” earthly beauty, we must look to Christ – to the concrete and radiant form of revelation. “To see Jesus means to see... the glory radiating from the Father.” The form of the cross, however, appears as *Gestaltlosigkeit*, formlessness or the “deprivation of form.” Paradoxically, it is at precisely this point the glory of the Lord (*Herrlichkeit*) takes on a determinate, visible historical “form” most clearly. David Luy calls this moment the aesthetic “collision,” where the analogical

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101 Ibid.
102 Ibid., 425.
103 Ibid., 667.
104 Ibid., 62.
aesthetic categories Balthasar has established throughout *Herrlichkeit* are “intensified”—yet rather than ‘snapping,’ each of the three “tethers” which connect revelatory “forms” to, respectively, the “intra-trinitarian kenosis” on one side, the “categories of finite existence” on the other, and the “particular modality of sin and guilt” as necessary context, come together in a great, redemptive intersection. The seemingly disjunctive event of the cross thus becomes the “culminating nodal point” where “each tether is perfectly preserved and expressed”—it is itself the “primal” or “archetypal” form.105 Rather than negating revelation, the cross—including both Christ’s death and subsequent *descensus*—remains the fullness of “revelation,” even as it shatters and dissolves the “image of eternal life”; we can never think of glory the same way.106 “The Cross thus becomes the entry point through which humanity encounters a new truth, a new goodness, and the awareness of the most provocative beauty.”107

Much philosophical aesthetics, from Kant all the way back to Thomas Aquinas, has defined the beautiful as *id quom visa placent*, “that which, being seen, pleases.” The cross seems like an odd object of aesthetic “pleasure,” even more so of desire (*eros*). Yet Balthasar places this singular event of mutilation and death—which must, of course, be seen in the larger context of the divine-human theo-drama—at the very heart of theological *aisthesis*. By resolutely focusing on the cross, a theological aesthetics thus must neither, as one author puts it, “deny the ugly its place in a theology of God’s

105 Luy, 157-168.
107 Goulding, 249.
beauty or abstractly explain the ugly away.”¹⁰⁸ A helpful distinction is thus drawn between “transcendental” and “inner-worldly” beauty; Christian beauty must include the cross and the “unbearable” aspects of existence which are “discarded” by a “worldly aesthetics”—it must include evil and death, not by covering them over but by transforming them.¹⁰⁹ The glory of the cross is transcendentally beautiful, though again not beautiful in an “earthly” sense. As Raymond Gawronski notes, “the aesthetics of the cross is not one of symmetry, but rather, one that breaks symmetry—and yet within, there is a beauty bursting into the world with a cry of pain that shatters all the canons of art, that dwarfs mere aestheticism and replaces it with the beauty of God made man.”¹¹⁰

This raises questions, of course, for “Christian art,” as Barth and Balthasar were both aware. Prettifying the cross in artistic depictions is to fall prey to aestheticism—trying to make transcendental glory into something graspable (and palatable) using earthly categories. Barth and Balthasar both hold up not Fra Angelico or Botticelli, but Matthias Grünewald’s terrifying crucifixion as the one most fitting to its subject matter—hideously ugly and disturbing, yet because of the crucified form it depicts suggesting the sublime glory of Christ’s death which restores “sick” humanity to God.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Mongrain, 62.
Balthasar saw the German Idealist elevation of historical process as something of a dead end for theology—an overly optimistic adequation of Geist and human culture—and thus pointed to the more ‘grounded’ historical sensibility of thinkers like Marx and Kierkegaard as necessary correctives. Accordingly, his theological aesthetics, written in the shadow of the horrors of war and the complicated realities of the twentieth century, was not intended to cover over “naked matter” with a false aestheticism (the bourgeois approach criticized by anti-aesthetic aesthetics) but to deal responsibly and carefully with the existence of beauty in a fallen world.

There are keen implications here for art history both inside and outside of the Christian realm. Balthasar is emphatic in arguing that

since the world contains so much horror, it would be pure aestheticism to lock ourselves in a realm of beautiful forms. The hideous form [Ungestalt] is part of the world’s form [Gestalt], and so it must be included, essentially, among the themes and subject matter of artistic creation. Insofar as art is expression, and hence word, what is devoid of form [das Gestaltlose] can be part of the alphabet with which art puts itself into words... This is made clear by Expressionism and Surrealism.114

The grotesque—one thinks of the paintings of Francis Bacon, or of Goya’s “Saturn Eating His Children,” or perhaps of Chris Burden being wounded by a bullet as performance art—thus plays a crucial function in theology. Formless art, or indeed even art which

112 GL1, 19.
113 Ibid., 90.
114 GL1, 19.
actively pursues the “nonword” or hideous formlessness of the world, may deepen our experience of the primal, crucified form of Christ—a sensual form which transfigures us as subjects to the spiritual realm.

Postmodern Trajectories

What are we to do with a cruciform aesthetics—“spiritual senses” which have been born out of the physical through death and immolation? The postmodern philosopher of religion Richard Kearney, in his reading of Merleau-Ponty, sees Christian embodiment as “a restoration of the divine within the flesh, a kenotic emptying out of transcendence into the heart of the world’s body, becoming a God beneath us rather than a God beyond.” With Kearney’s phenomenological concerns in mind, I suggest that a theological aesthetics which has authentically passed through death is one better able to dialogue with “secular” aesthetics than a theologia gloriae which does not express the “way of seeing” endemic to faith in terms of immanence and abandonment – in other words, a theo-aesthetics centered on a theology of the cross. Contemporary theological aesthetics can benefit not only from an enriched sense of Being, but from a better understanding of the kenotic modality in which the human sensorium comes into the light of glory. Applied to art, we thus have a vocabulary for speaking about not only beauty, but ugliness; not just the heights of transcendence, but the depths of desolation and chaos. As Balthasar’s contemporary Karl Barth wrote, “In [his] self-revelation, God’s beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we call ‘ugly’ as well as
what we call ‘beautiful’.” A theological aesthetics which hinges on the cross and the dark night of the soul expands to cover the heights and the depths of human experience, not trivializing evil and suffering but confronting them with a singular intensity.

For his part, Kearney has made constructive use of the phenomenological tradition to recover the importance of the flesh for postmodern theology. Kearney’s “anatheism,” a return to God “after a certain death of God” flows from not only his re-reading of particular biblical texts but from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, who unlike Husserl and Heidegger pays sufficient attention to the embodied nature of human experience: “it was not really until Merleau-Ponty that we got a credible return to the flesh; and not just as cipher, project or icon, but as flesh itself in all its ontological depth.” Here the language of Being which was outlined in a previous chapter is unfolded in sensual terms—flesh is itself a point of “mutual crossing-over” between subject and object, a primordial element of Being. The French philosopher and theologian Jean-Luc Marion similarly characterizes the flesh as a “saturated phenomenon,” a horizon-shattering event of disclosure which calls for a new phenomenality, particularly in light of Christian revelation which sums up all the modalities of phenomenality: event, flesh, icon. In Kearney’s case, this leads to a retrieval of Merleau-Ponty’s religious, sacramental language—the “eucharist of profane

\[\text{\textsuperscript{115} Richard Kearney, Anatheism: Returning to God after God (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).}\]

perception” where flesh meets world.\textsuperscript{117} “It is precisely when Merleau-Ponty traces the phenomenological return all the way down to the lowest rung of experience (in the old metaphysical ladder, the \textit{sensible}) that he discovers the most sacramental act of communion.” Art then takes the form of a “consecration” of life, as “the artist converts his corporeal situation into a sacramental witness.”\textsuperscript{118} This is Heideggerian paying heed understood in sensuous terms, art conceived of in terms of an “aesthetics of transubstantiation.”\textsuperscript{119} Kearney is by no means trying to misread the phenomenological tradition as an apologetic for traditional Christianity. Rather, he searches for Christian embodiment as “a restoration of the divine within the flesh, a kenotic emptying out of transcendence into the heart of the world’s body, becoming a God beneath us rather than a God beyond.” This is, paradoxically, a postmetaphysical quest with deep resonances with Balthasar’s expressly metaphysical project. The divine is for Kearney, in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, “another ourself which dwells in and authenticates our darkness.” Yet here it is clear just what Balthasar’s phenomenological approach to art and revelation yields—a “doctrine of perception” which has space for both transcendence and immanence, life and death, flesh and Spirit.\textsuperscript{120}

For this reason, Balthasar sees calls, particularly by Protestants who “[make] capital out of the crisis of modern art,” to rehabilitate a new “Christian art” for a new age as being

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 335.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 337.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 338.
\textsuperscript{120} Here I am indebted to an as-yet unpublished paper by John Caruana of Ryerson University.
largely irrelevant.\textsuperscript{121} His concern is not this-worldly beauty considered as an end in itself, but the glory which manifests itself even in the midst of poverty and “utter exposure to a cold, heartless world of technology.”\textsuperscript{122} “It is not important whether or not there is generated from this something beautiful within the world, some form of ‘Christian art’; the birth of what is artistically beautiful is subject to inner-worldly conditions and periods of taste, which do not apply to what is Christian.”\textsuperscript{123}

Even the unremarkable and the ugly, the vulgar and meaningless, can contribute to an intimation of a larger totality, without any "artificial sweetening."\textsuperscript{124} This, for Balthasar, is a key feature of the concept of form. The relation or context of the form to the whole is the key to grasping it in its integrity; this is a “relational aesthetics” with a theological bent. Such a grounding in reality helps guard against the danger, stated succinctly by Kevin Hector, that "metaphysics can render one insensitive to actual experience, since the essence to which one’s ideas supposedly correspond is defined as that fundamental reality which stands at a remove from experience."\textsuperscript{125} Artists can help keep metaphysicians from abstraction by continually connecting us to the “World’s Body.”

\textbf{Theological Implications}

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{GL4}, 27.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 29.
In this brief overview of Balthasar’s approach to the physical and spiritual senses, the deleterious effects of the loss of the sensorium for theology become apparent. Cut off from the riches of tradition, Christians become “blind” and “deaf” to not just the propositional and linguistic content of the creeds but the visual, tactile, ritual, mystical and affective dimensions of the experience of faith which are passed down through the ages. For Balthasar, these dimensions include such sensorial phenomena as the liturgy, which transfigures the “aesthetic cosmos” into the “noetic” realm of divine truth and presence; sacred art (and, by extension, iconography); mysticism which through the exercise of the senses shares in the “archetypal experiences” of faith of Mary, the apostles and even Christ himself; the “sense” of divine presence in the forms of creation and throughout the Scriptures, particularly in the vivid (archetypal and typological) imagery of the Old Testament; and the “sensory,” bodily phenomenon of the Incarnation itself. We may add to this list the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, where the Body of the Word-made-flesh is “tasted” and consumed. These diverse “aesthetic” elements, along with many others, form and shape the deposit of faith.

126 John Dillenberger is just one of the contemporary writers to note the variety of elements, each appealing to different “senses,” which have comprised the Christian tradition at least since the converted synagogue at Dura-Europos. Alongside doctrines and formulae, ecclesial tradition yields a rich repository of visual imagery (both sacred “works of art” and iconography), music and poetry, ritual-dramatic practices, and a vast universe of symbolic meanings. Clearly in this sense, one may appreciate that a range of “sensibilities” – not just intellectual “faith” – are required for the ‘reception’ of Christian tradition and theology as mediated through the Church. It is only by historical contingency that certain “sensibilities” – Dillenberger flags especially the faculties of “sight, touch, taste” – have been mistrusted and downplayed in favour of “propositional” or “verbal sensibilities. See John Dillenberger, A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 239.

127 GL1, 422-423.
bequeathed to the Church, and call for their own unique “sensibilities” when it comes to the reception of apostolic faith. The observation that this kind of aisthesis is lost in the modern age is thus not just a pragmatic or practical assessment; rather, the idea that the “one holy and apostolic Church” which believers take as an article of faith finds as a whole its “senses” (both physical and spiritual) dulled to the point of “insensibility” is a fundamentally theological statement about the Church. What Anglican theologian Ephraim Radner suggests regarding “pneumatic withdrawal” in the divided Church suggests, to employ Balthasar’s terminology, a failure to “see the form”—the “indissoluble,” “organic” totality which emerges from the “unique proportion of promise and fulfillment” found in “seeing” Old and New Testaments together, in “tasting” the manifold witness of ecclesial tradition, and even in “beholding” the forms of nature – namely, the perfect “form” of Christ himself. Such an aesthetic failure would, for Balthasar, represent a deficiency in the Church’s archetypal Marian subjectivity which, “in the mystery of the Holy Spirit,”¹²⁸ must constantly ‘open’ its “consciousness” to the presence of Christ.

¹²⁸ ET2, 191.
VI: The Work of Art in the Age of Theo-Drama

This chapter explores Balthasar’s relevance to contemporary theologies of art through his dramatics. Balthasar repeatedly makes it clear that theological aesthetics as a project only makes sense when paired with a theological dramatics, which is to say an investigation of glory centered on the narrative revelation of God in Christ—the divine-human theo-drama, which is moreover anchored in the eternal drama of the perichoresis of the Trinity. Beginning with Walter Benjamin’s notes on the loss of “aura” and origin in twentieth-century art, I examine Balthasar’s use of drama as a theological instrumentarium in order to outline his christocentric “dramatic-narrative” theology of culture. This further develops the theme of Christ as supreme artistic “form,” here not just presented in ‘static’ relation to other forms but “universalized” (in a kind of aesthetic “universalism”) as the measure for all aesthetic and cultural inquiry.

Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin’s seminal text The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction describes the grim situation of art in the postindustrial era. For Benjamin, the mechanical reproduction of art, though it makes art available to the masses on an unprecedented and unforeseeable scale, represents a fundamental change in the ontology of art. Mass production—the “proliferation of images” later described by Jean Baudrillard—takes away from the unique “aura” of the individual work of art. Gone is
the palpable, quasi-religious presence Rilke associated with standing in front of a masterpiece, the uniqueness of artistic form explored in previous chapters. In the age of technological reproduction, the very concepts of “origin” and “original” are blurred beyond recognition, resulting in a diminishment of authenticity and existential force: “The presence of the painting in the photograph of it, like the presence of music or drama on the radio, is a bloodless presence. In the first case, it is a real but diminished presence. In the second case, there is a fuller presence, but it exists by proxy and is always imperfect.”

The ontology of art in the technological age of radios and television is, for Benjamin, one of displacement and disembodiment. The proliferation of mass-produced copies of images diminishes the uniqueness of the artwork—its “aura,” or in Heideggerian terms its origin. The work of art is not present in one particular place or historical moment, but instead in its reproducibility is both everywhere and nowhere. Benjamin suggest that in such a situation authentic contemplation is impossible; instead, distraction and self-gratification become societal norms.

Key to understanding Benjamin’s concern about the loss of the aura is his assessment of the dissolution of the theatre in modernity. Benjamin shares with his contemporary Hans Urs von Balthasar a sense of the end of the elevated dramatic tradition, describing the medium of drama as dislocated in the contemporary cultural situation where the

1 Dufrenne, 44.
very “mode of human sense-perception” has been irrevocably altered by “mechanical reproduction.”\(^2\) For Benjamin, drama, especially in its translation to the reproducible format of film, had become inherently fragmented, illusory, the work of the actor obscured by a proliferation of “positional views” such as the movements of the camera and mechanisms of montage. The cinema has evolved considerably since Benjamin wrote, so his assessment of the medium seems inadequate. Yet the point he makes is an interesting one. For Benjamin, what is lost in the transition from stage to screen, in a way analogous to the loss of aesthetic uniqueness in visual art and music, is the “aura” of the dramatic performance, the experiential sense of authentic ‘presence’ which attends the audience of a live theatrical play and has done so ever since the religious origin of the theatre in sacred rituals and mystery-plays: “For the first time ... man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor.”\(^3\)

One of the most crucial aspects of the theatre for Balthasar in his Theo-Drama is the


\(^3\) Benjamin, 8.
way it materializes the human propensity to see life as possessing an inherent meaning, as being a coherent whole (a viewable “image”\(^4\)) rather than a series of unrelated facts or events. For him, human beings desire to see their lives as if they were part of a larger unfolding story, with each action and set of circumstances serving an intelligible purpose, and are able to see this take place in an explicit way on the stage. Balthasar traces the history of the theatre from its early, ritual origins, aspects of which survive into the Greek tragedies, where the main character (a ‘figure,’ *Gestalt*) has the events of their life play out before the watchful eyes of the gods, giving ‘earthly’ activities a cosmic significance.\(^5\) (We have already outlined this trope in relation to his Heideggerian archaeology of glory in *Herrlichkeit.*) This later evolved into the solitary figure making choices against the ‘backdrop’ of blind fate, which still later faded from view as the ‘ground’ (*Grund*) from which the dramatic ‘figure’ is distinguished came to be human culture, represented in the form of the Chorus, rather than a preternatural agent or force. In each of these instances, remembering especially the cultic origins of the drama, the drama enacts the latent trope of human freedom as a “spectacle” to the universe; the actualizing of human freedom takes place in a sort of dialectical relationship with the always-already present spectre of a greater force or consciousness, which exercises its own, superior ‘freedom.’ Sometimes the gods or fate overrule human freedom, as in the Homeric epics or, later, in *Macbeth*; in the case of the Christian story, divine and human freedom mysteriously cohere. Balthasar finds intimations throughout the history of the theatre that lead up to the ultimate “spectacle” of Christ on the cross—

\(^4\) *TD1*, 17.

\(^5\) Ibid., 135-257.
before the eyes of God and of the entire human world—as well as the apostle’s language of being a “spectacle [theatron] to the world, to angels, and to men” (1 Cor. 4:9, ESV), an echo of the language of the Roman arena. Christ, and by extension his Mystical Body the church, becomes the one amidst all human culture in whom divine and human freedom meet, where the acceptance of a “role” and its performance on the “world stage” cohere into a cosmic, archetypal drama. The “super-drama” of Christ is archetypal precisely because his free acceptance of a “role” to be performed within human culture is to be taken up by the apostolic church.

In contrast to this implicitly theological ontology of the stage, Balthasar suggested that in the twentieth century the stage had moved away not only from theological concerns but even the treatment of metaphysical and existential problems. He believed that “all post-Christian drama can be regarded as a fragment of a drama that presses toward the Christian horizon,” but it was clear to him that such artistic “post-figuration” (as he perceived in Shakespeare and Calderon) was becoming less and less explicit in its pointing back to Christ as the ultimate Gestalt even as dramatic structure itself was being broken down into absurdist, even nihilistic fragments (one thinks of Dada theatre, such as the work of Tristan Tzara, or as Sean Michaelson has pointed out the absurdist theatre of Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard, and Jean Genet). Like Hegel, whose typology

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6 Ibid., 321.
7 For more on this, see two interesting doctoral dissertations: Sean Donald Michaelson, SJ, “Theo-Drama in the Absurd: Balthasar, Absurd Theatre and Divine Activity,” MA thesis, Regis College (April 2008). See also Clive Dennis Allnutt,
of art he recounts in detail in *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar seems to have essentially seen post-Christian art (Hegel’s “Romantic” period) as being in a state of “disintegration,” although perhaps not irreversibly so. He thus wonders, in a cultural and artistic milieu profoundly affected by Hegel, whether “it would be anachronistic today, when drama is in decline, indeed may have collapsed already, to write a theodramatic theory.”

Balthasar’s insistence on a theological dramatics as a necessary corollary to and development of theological aesthetics has implications for framing (as Balthasar does) the involvement of the triune God with human culture in “universal” terms as well as a properly theological aesthetics with God in Christ as “object.” Thus it is to the theodramatic that one must turn to gain an adequate understanding of Balthasar’s implicit christocentric theology of the arts, as well as for a more complete understanding of the scope and nature of his understanding of “seeing the form.”

Stephen Garrett aptly sums up theological aesthetics, in both Barth and Balthasar, as investigation of God’s “Beauty-in-Act”—not an abstract beauty, but the beauty disclosed definitively and authentically through God’s self-revelation as triune. “The perfect content is the Trinitarian life of the one God in all his perfections. The perfect form is the *concretissimum* of the triune God, the one being of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

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8 *TD1*, 63-65.
9 Ibid., 67.
11 Garrett, 461.
using drama as a “resource” for theology, Balthasar situates the discussion of human freedom and divine action within the paradigm of the dynamic between actor and audience, a relationship characterized by embodied presence, communion and ultimately participation, a context which—especially when explored with reference to Walter Benjamin’s critique of the contemporary theatre—opens up crucial aspects of Christ as the archetypal “form” (Gestalt).\(^\text{12}\) Secondly, a theo-dramatic paradigm expresses more fully the universality of Christ—Christ as the “concrete universal”—extending Balthasar’s concept of the concretissimum beyond Christ as the perfect concretization of the analogy of being (in Herrlichkeit) to Christ as the Irenaean “head” who recapitulates human history in the course of the divine drama. While an overly “aesthetic” theology could lose sight of Christ amidst other (albeit derivative) epiphanic forms, it is only through a theo-dramatics that the unique theophany of the Incarnation, death and resurrection can be seen as possessing a universality that can approach (but not reach) the mystery of apokatastasis without succumbing to heterodoxy. (The latter was the fate of Hegel, who made artistic activity a stage on the way to the totalizing universality of the self-realization of Geist in human culture). Thirdly, a clear view of “theo-drama” in relation to culture—the very culture whose artifacts can serve as spurs to press on to a more enduring Beauty—appropriately situates the latter in a “dramatic-narrative” relationship to Christ, where it has a relative autonomy and freedom but still finds its climax in his universal redemptive “act.” Thus the way the Theo-Drama ‘opens up’ theological aesthetics prevents theologians from, as Balthasar cautions against on

\(^{12}\) See Ibid., 11.
the very first page of *Herrlichkeit*, separating the transcendentals (Beauty, Truth, Goodness) from each other and from their temporal expression in human history and culture.

There is a particular significance in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s choice of drama, a narrative, literary art form, as a paradigm for understanding the “action” of God “in and upon the world”\(^{13}\) in both *Theo-Drama* and in shorter writings such as his *A Theology of History*. The unfolding of dramatic action on the stage exhibits (among other things) the interplay of temporality, particularity, character ‘development,’ embodiment/presence and *telos* which together explicate and develop the themes of the theological aesthetics better than a sustained analogue with a non-narrative art form could accomplish. “If by ‘aesthetics’ we are thinking more of the act of perception or its ‘beautiful’ object, we are succumbing to a static view which cannot do justice to the phenomenon.”\(^{14}\) Such a “static” view would constitute a purely subject-oriented striving towards universality, as one might be prone to adopt when taking a ‘static’ art form as an *instrumentarium* for theology; for Balthasar, this is insufficient for a properly theological consideration of the Beautiful, Good and True (the subjects of *Herrlichkeit*, *Theo-Drama* and *Theo-Logic*, respectively, which proceed through these “transcendentals” in an inverse order to Kant’s *Critiques*) and their revelation in the created cosmos.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 15.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 16.  
\(^{15}\) As Imperatori has pointed out, there is also a Heideggerian polemic to Balthasar’s dramatics. While Heidegger framed *Ge-stell* (“enframing”) in terms of forgetfulness of impersonal Being, for Balthasar the same *Gestell* is the end of humanity,
One of the most important aspects of theatre for Balthasar is the “communion” between actor and audience, as the actor in real time and space *performs* an embodied, communicative act, taking on a character for the benefit of the attentive audience.\(^{16}\) The actor “becomes” Macbeth or Hamlet, inhabiting the role with his very body and so radiating an assumed ‘authenticity’ for the sake of the play. As we have seen in previous chapters, in the theological aesthetics it is the work of art (e.g. the painting) which radiates sensuous “presence” and invites, or even compels, the viewer to engage with it. This is the “event of the beautiful,” as we have seen in previous chapters. Yet this Barthian, existential language of “event” (*Ereignis*) Balthasar now surrenders in favour of dramatic action. Drama thus has an ontological significance for Balthasar, for it better captures the dynamism of the cascade of worldly forms in history than a purely visual (or painterly) paradigm for theo-aesthetics.

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\(^{16}\) Balthasar, *TD1*, 306.
If the ‘presence’ or ‘aura’ of the actor on the stage before a human audience is destroyed by technological mediation, then the intersubjective relationship between actor and audience is annulled and a key component of the appropriateness of drama as a theological *instrumentarium* is lost. For if Christ is the primary ‘actor’ in a cosmic spectacle, what happens when culture can no longer perceive his “aura,” the radiance of originality or authentic divine *presence* which comes from the performance or enactment of his particular salvific ‘role’? In such a scenario, Benjamin’s prophetic words about mankind, once “an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods,” now able to experience its own spectacular self-destruction as “an aesthetic pleasure of the highest order,” begin to seem a fitting epitaph for the twentieth century; no longer able to “see the form,” culture is given over to destruction and despair.

Given such major problems in looking at contemporary drama as “post-figuration,” it is clear that Balthasar’s decision to use drama as a theological *instrumentarium* was far from arbitrary. Balthasar saw dramatic elements as inherent in the biblical narrative, and so his efforts towards a “theological dramatic theory” were not intended as impositions of an alien set of categories but the development of implicit themes and modes within the structure of Christian revelation. The loss of the “aura,” sacral/ritual origins of theatre and the theological ‘horizon’ in contemporary drama serve only to underscore the importance of recovering a sense of the form (*Gestalt*), of the radiant mystery of the Christ who has made his appearance on the “world stage.” In certain sections of *Herrlichkeit*, Balthasar considers the ‘upwards,’ human movement to God as
an “aesthetic moment within contemplation,” a synchronic response of faith or immediate perception such as one might have when contemplating a icon or great work of art (with its Benjamianian “aura”). Such transport results from one manner of “beholding the form,” moving from aesthetic vision to rapture, which can occur as a simultaneous, immediate event – a “glance” that leads back to the divine. However, the mirroring, antecedent ‘downward’ self-revelation of God which enables this human response is by its very nature diachronic, dramatic, a “genuine unfolding of himself in the worldly stuff of nature, man, and history—an event which in a supereminent sense may be called an ‘appearance’ or ‘epiphany’.” The epiphanic “event” of God’s “con-descension” is thus not just a vertical interruption, a pure apocalyptic “now” which calls into question all of history (a position Balthasar ascribes to the early Karl Barth); rather, it “requires horizontal time in which to unfold.” It is a dramatic revelation, for which dramatic categories are appropriate; thus the loss of the ontology of the theatre in the “age of mechanical reproduction” ought not to delimit the scope of a theology of culture worked out using dramatic categories. For it is the divine “super-drama” which relativizes human drama, forming an analogy from the ‘top down.’ Benjamin’s critique of the work of dramatic art in the fragmented twentieth century would only reinforce for Balthasar the enduring, universal quality of the beautiful, self-evident “aura” of Christ, the ‘object’ of a true theological aesthetics.

17 Balthasar, GL1, 40.
18 See, for example, Ibid., 488.
19 Ibid., 119.
20 Balthasar, TD1, 27.
Balthasar and Theology of Culture

The implicit “theology of culture” in Balthasar’s work is not easily reducible to one of the typologies famously identified by H. Richard Niebuhr: the triumphalist “Christ against culture,” the liberal “Christ of culture” where Christ is the highest expression of the human spirit, Niebuhr’s own preferred option “Christ the transformer of culture,” and so on. For Niebuhr, these represented ways of configuring Christ and culture which have occurred through history and recur in contemporary theologies. Even “Christ above culture” and “Christ the transformer of culture,” however, do not do justice to the complexity of Balthasar’s concept of Christ and the human, or more broadly of the relationship of nature and grace, which is centered on the notion of Christ as the “concrete universal.” The term “concrete” is in some ways reminiscent of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Balthasar’s Protestant contemporary who emphasized strongly the “this-worldliness” of the Christian message, from the concreteness of the Incarnation to the concrete nature of revelation in the temporal spheres of the ethical and social embodied in the determinate form of the community or ekklesia. However, Balthasar clearly departs from Bonhoeffer and his “religionless Christianity” by positing Christ as not just concrete but universal—and universal not by virtue of the evolution of secular

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21 See H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). Niebuhr, a liberal Protestant at Union Theological Seminary, developed these five typologies as a way of accounting for the wide varieties of public theology.
culture in a “world come of age” but as the conreissimum ens who draws together the fabric of the cosmos in his enfleshed, hypostatic form.

To understand Balthasar’s unique concept of Christ as conreissimum (and how this relates to his theology of culture, nature and grace) it is necessary to briefly trace his specific development of this doctrine out of his discussion of forms and the mystery of being throughout the first volume of Herrlichkeit. Balthasar sums up the relationship of form(s) to the analogy of being succinctly at the outset of the second volume of “The Glory of the Lord” in reference to beauty and the aesthetic: “If everything in the world that is fine and beautiful is epiphaneia, the radiance and splendour which breaks forth in expressive form from a veiled and yet mighty depth of being, then the event of the self-revelation of the hidden, the utterly free and sovereign God in the forms of this world, in word and history, and finally in the human form itself, will itself form an analogy to that worldly beauty however far it outstrips it.”23 The inadequacy of language to fully articulate the superabundant fullness of God does not mean that earthly forms cannot act as vehicles of revelation; the plurality of ‘forms’ of human culture can be interpreted theologically, so long as their analogical relation to the “free,” transcendent God is maintained. The historical self-revelation of God becomes the “measure” for all earthly forms.

23 Balthasar, GL2, 11.
This theory of “forms” apparent in Balthasar’s formulation of the analogia entis postulates form as the “sign and appearing of a depth and a fullness,” namely the deep wells of the mystery of Being. Human subjects are led to “see the form,” to truly see something in its ontological “splendour,” when they perceive both the “real presence of the depths” within an object and the “real pointing beyond itself” (to those depths of being) that it displays. The sacramental language is hard to miss—the “real presence,” here as in the Eucharist, refers to the way beautiful forms are both signs and instruments of something beyond themselves. Like the sacraments, the beautiful form ‘effects what it signifies,’ in this case the “truth and goodness of the depths of reality,” further, in what amounts to an epiphanic appearance, the ‘analogy’ of beauty points to and communicates something of the divine presence beyond (and above) the depths. Beholding the form in its unity with the mysterious depths of Being thus becomes not only an existential/aesthetic but an ‘upward’ theological act of perception; faith, the human “movement” toward God which Balthasar sees typified in the Marian response as well as that of the communion of saints.

Balthasar goes further in this development of a theological aesthetics, however, in positing Christ as the analogy of being in concrete, human form: the concrete universal

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24 Balthasar, GL1, 118.
25 Ibid., 500.
26 Ibid., 118.
27 Ibid., 123.
against which all images of God are measured.\textsuperscript{28} Balthasar considers Christ as the “centre of the form of revelation,”\textsuperscript{29} which underscores his role as the one “before all things” in whom “all things hold together” (Col. 1:17) in both an ontological and salvation-historical sense. Thus “seeing the form” (the title of the first volume of \textit{Herrlichkeit}) is thus not only pertinent to the apprehension of natural and artistic “forms”, but especially pertains to seeing the form of Christ. For Balthasar, all forms exist in a dramatic relationship to the form of Christ, which is to say his Incarnate life-form, the historical shape of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who died, rose again and was exalted to the right hand of the Father. This is not an idealization of Christ, but stems from Balthasar’s christocentric aesthetics where ”the "de-formity" of Christ's death on the Cross and God's abandonment of him on Golgotha occupy a central place in this total form.”\textsuperscript{30} The “nonword” of the Cross is at the center of the “definitive divine Word.”\textsuperscript{31}

As we have seen, this ‘beautiful,’ irreducibly unique life-form, when contemplated in its entirety, possesses and displays an ineluctable “interior rightness and evidential power such as we find... in a work of art or in a mathematical principle.”\textsuperscript{32} In other words, the Christ-form itself is the perfect model of Thomistic proportionality, integrity, and clarity,

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\textsuperscript{29} Balthasar, \textit{GL}1, 463.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Epilogue}, 65.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{TD}2, 27-28.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 465-66.
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not despite its apparent ugliness but precisely because of it. Particularly in its inclusion of the “checkered, crude, historical reality of realistic humanity,”

including a profound solidarity with human suffering, poverty and dispossession—humbling himself as a servant even unto death on a cross (Phil. 2:7-8)—the self-evidently persuasive form of Christ has for Balthasar the potential to re-define our concept of beauty. Christ as a “spectacle” on the cross, an instrument of torture, becomes a vision to “behold”; as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14), so that anyone who looked on it was saved, so the Son of Man is “lifted up” on the cross to draw all men to himself (12:32); this is an ‘aesthetic’ theophany, consistent with the “pre-figuration” of Christ in the Old Testament which also occurred in ‘aesthetic’ (i.e., sensible) forms. The form of Christ is thus the form par excellence, the “measure for all other worldly and human measures”

which serves as an archetype for all other aesthetic forms, and which definitively discloses the “beauty” (i.e., “glory”) of God of which earthly beauty is only an analogue. Balthasar is careful to assert, however, even in the opening pages of Herrlichkeit that we “ought never to speak of God’s beauty without reference to the form and manner of appearing which he exhibits in salvation-history,” the determinate, historical form of the Word in human flesh, especially the “cruciform” image which reveals in a unique way the action and involvement of God in human

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33 Theology of History, 75.
34 Balthasar, Gl1, 468.
35 Ibid., 124.
history. This identification of “seeing the form” with the form of Christ in Herrlichkeit thus already anticipates the importance of the universal divine drama Balthasar poses as the necessary development of the theo-aesthetic encounter.

Here the universality of Christ as concretissimum ens is paradoxically bound up with his very particular form.

For this beautiful object [Christ] is revelation: it is the beauty of God that appears in man and the beauty of man which is to be found in God and in God alone. ... What perfection and infinity really are for man, what emanation and encapsulation, self-surrender and being caught up really are, what ‘transfiguration,’ ‘deification’, ‘immortality’ really are and what all the great words of aesthetics signify: it is in the Christ-form that all of it has its measure and its true context. ³⁶

Philosophy, aesthetics, religion, theology and culture all find their climax in Christ, in the “form” above all forms where the analogy of being becomes the “universale concretum et personale”³⁷ who takes on the depth and breadth of human experience. The capacity of the multiplicity of other forms to display meaning and beauty is contingent on their relation to the historical appearance of this personal, historical “form of forms.”³⁸ This is a crucial component of a Balthasarian “theology of culture.” As Louis Dupre puts it, “When God assumed human nature in the Incarnation, He transformed the very

³⁶ Ibid., 477.
³⁷ Balthasar, Theology of History, 92.
³⁸ Quash, 27.
meaning of culture. Henceforth all forms would have to be measured by the supreme form of God in the flesh.”

Hypostatic Union

The coherence of the analogy of being and the multiplicity of forms in the historical person of Christ, however, poses a potential problem for considering the hypostatic union between his divine and human natures. If the human and the divine are separated by a *maior dissimilitudino*, how can one person with both a human and divine nature truly possess a single identity? How can Christ truly be the *analogia entis* in concrete form? The “missing element” which Balthasar identifies as the solution to this problem of the communication of idioms (human and divine) is the *mission* of Christ, as present in his (single, united) consciousness.

For exploring this archetypal mission dramatic categories are extremely well-suited, as they can reframe the Christological particularism Balthasar outlined in *Herrlichkeit* from potentially static, aesthetic categories to the realm of the diachronic and dramatic. The *analogia entis* is thus, in the consciousness of Christ, transposed “into temporal terms.”

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Thus in the *Theo-Drama* the concrete universality of Christ as *concretissimum* is developed more fully than in the theological aesthetics into a sense of Christ’s *mission* in the temporality of his life, the dramatic “role” he plays which finds its origin in the eternal procession of the Son from the Father within the Trinity (the earthly *missio* is a modality of the *processio*) and moves forward into the concrete mission (the “time”) of the church.⁴² So although his mission has “no conceivable temporal beginning,” originating as it does in the perichoresis of the Trinity, it takes on an increasing historicity with the birth, growth, life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.⁴³ This theo-dramatic rendering of the mission of Christ hinges on the transposition from the historical particularism of his life to the “universal stage,”⁴⁴ i.e. to the universality or catholicity that the church now claims. Balthasar sees a “latent universalism”⁴⁵ within the very consciousness of Christ; aware of his “role” within the drama, his mission is not an “extrahistorical” one but “eschatological and universal.”⁴⁶ Christ plays his part perfectly in the unfolding divine drama, displaying a sort of character development as one finds in Greek tragedy; the “take this cup” prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane recorded in Mark 14 is but one example of his growing ‘self-awareness’ as his mission proceeds towards Calvary. This growth on the part of the Incarnate Son is a gradual process, which makes dramatic categories especially appropriate; just as a character in a play becomes more fully “who she is,” actualizing or ‘realizing’ in the dramatic action

⁴² *TD3*, 226. See Yenson, 115.
⁴³ Ibid., 158.
⁴⁴ Ibid., 138.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 140.
⁴⁶ Ibid., 149.
her identity, so too in the Gospels Christ undergoes a ‘becoming’ which in no way compromises his ‘being’ as the Incarnate Word. The hypostatic union ensures that each action of Christ in history is a perfect vehicle of God’s self-revelation. Balthasar thus lays particular emphasis on the “consciousness of Christ”; for in a ‘dramatic’ way, Christ becomes aware of the universality of his own mission. This is by no means a straightforward concept, as Balthasar realizes; Jesus is somehow identical with his mission (his whole identity is as the “one sent”), yet he somehow has a concept of his mission as mission, and specifically of that mission’s universal character.

Crucially, for Balthasar, this dramatic process of growing self-awareness on the part of the “historical Jesus” is a microcosm of the much larger process outlined by Irenaeus of the eternal Logos “becoming accustomed” to human culture in pre-Incarnation salvation history. [Balthasar, as can be expected, rejects entirely the separation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith made famous by Martin Kähler (1835-1912)]. For Irenaeus, a growing awareness of the divine emerged not only in the forms of Old Testament prophecy and figuration (looking ahead to fulfillment in the Word-made-flesh) but also in pagan philosophy in the ages of history before Christ, as a sort of preparation for the gospel. This gradual process of the self-realization of the Logos, which in some ways invites a parallel with Hegel, is consistent with the rest of Irenaeus’

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48 Balthasar, TD3, 164. See Yenson.
49 Ibid., 166.
50 Souletie, 8.
51 Ibid., 201.
paradigm of divine dramatic involvement with the world where the Son and Spirit draw “all flesh,” i.e. the temporal forms of human culture, into the divine. The acclimatization of the Logos is the antecedent condition for Irenaeus’ more well-known doctrine of “recapitulation” (anakephalaiosis), where the mission of Jesus—originating in the eternal procession of the Son—sums up all human history, from creation through the Old Testament and by extension the story of all temporal human culture.\(^{52}\) Although the word “recapitulation” captures the ‘re-enactment’ inherent in Christ’s cosmic action, Irenaeus’ view of history is linear rather than cyclical.\(^{53}\) For both Irenaeus and Balthasar, however, the ‘concrete’ fulfillment and integration of history into Christ in his historical particularity is what gives meaning to history, and indeed to time itself;\(^{54}\) Christ, as the telos of the “temporal and historical extension” of the world, does not negate temporal, created matter, but gathers up the “power immanent in the temporal flow” into a transcendent unity.\(^{55}\) Irenaeus develops this recapitulation in further detail, even explaining how Christ had to pass through all the stages of a human life—from infancy to mature “old age”—in order to ‘sum up’ and so redeem human experience to the fullest extent.\(^{56}\) The Son “assumes” human culture in a temporal mode so that he can bring human culture into the life of God. Such a theology of recapitulation, with its Eastern tendency towards deification, clearly serves as one of the main patterns for Balthasar’s theo-dramatic theology of culture; the mission of Christ, involving both his

\(^{52}\) See Ibid., 252, and the fuller discussion in GL2, 51-94.

\(^{53}\) Hans Urs von Balthasar, Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved?” (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 230-231.

\(^{54}\) Theology of History, 60-61.

\(^{55}\) GL2, 51.

\(^{56}\) Robert McQueen Grant, Irenaeus of Lyons (London: Routledge, 1997), 50.
divine and human natures, is a temporal summation of all human experience, from the aesthetic to the mundane, from the highest achievements of culture to the lowest points of suffering and death (especially as evinced in Balthasar’s interpretation of Holy Saturday). All of these things, present in postlapsarian history as stages in the maturation of the human race, must be dramatically interpreted by Christ in order for his flesh to be the medium in which all aspects of the human converge. Souletie thus argues for an understanding of Balthasar’s christology as a circle: Christ as alpha and omega, the archetypal figure who gathers all things unto himself.\(^{57}\) Christ is the concrete universal precisely insofar as his experience of his mission is the “norm” for all of history and culture; his “carving out of a section of history in order to make it relevant to the whole of history” is a recapitulation in flesh which draws not only “all men” but all of the cosmos to himself.\(^{58}\) This “drama” of redemption is necessarily temporal—not because the historical and material must be sublated (Aufhebung) into the timeless ideal in a Hegelian spiral, but because human experience unfolds precisely on the “theatre of the world” in such a fashion, and so its redemption must assume this shape.

**Universalization**

Thus following Irenaeus, Balthasar’s theological aesthetics—perception of the material “cosmic beauty, which tells of the art of the creator”—cannot be separated from the “mystery of anakephalaiosis,” which is to say from the history of redemption, made

\(^{57}\) Souletie, 8.  
\(^{58}\) *Theology of History*, 82-83.
manifest in the life of Christ. All material-historical forms point to and are fulfilled in Christ, who draws them into the divine life. Here we can see how the “universalist” term *apokatastasis* or universal restoration, which Balthasar admits into dialogue despite its suspect history within theology, is a legitimate expression of the scope of Christ’s universality. Within the context of the theo-drama, Christ’s claim to be the *universal* saviour – the claim of “catholicity” taken up by the church—is firmly rooted in his *particularity*. This is not to say that Balthasar takes the concept of *apokatastasis* wholesale from Origen (the figure with whom it is most often associated), who implied that not only all mankind but even the devil would be saved in the eschaton. This is the amorphous, perhaps less than Christian version of “universalism” which has been officially condemned by the church over the centuries. Balthasar’s cautious exploration of the term is more in line with Irenaeus and Maximus the Confessor, where Christ is the key to the cosmos and the possibility of universal restoration in him is maintained as a possibility worthy of serious hope precisely because of his “uniqueness”; his “universal saving significance” results from his personhood and “singular, contingent concreteness.” His status as the “norm” of history does not mean that he conforms to an abstract ideal of the “universally human,” to which all humanity could easily attain (a simplistic version of the liberal “Christ of culture”); rather, the particularity of his

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59 GL2, 70.
60 TD3, 227.
61 Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 45; 230-231.
62 Veronica Donnelly, *Saving Beauty: Form as the Key to Balthasar’s Christology* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 175-176.
historical existence is inseparable from his existence as “he who is unique,” the fulfillment and climax of all history.\textsuperscript{64} With the focus set on the appearance of Christ as the decisive “event” of salvation-history, apokatastasis can be seen as an unrealized hint of the final curtain, where the eschatological ‘end’ of the drama is brought to a close, even though the great denouement has already taken place.

In this light we can make sense of the theology of history that Balthasar hints at in Herrlichkeit, where he states: “The Incarnation is the eschaton and, as such, is unsurpassable.”\textsuperscript{65} He frames this in Irenaean terms, where the “visibleness” of the invisible God in the human form of Jesus Christ is not transcended in the eschaton; the “concrete” Incarnation is not a preliminary phase, but the definitive, decisive Word after which (in a sense) the Father “has nothing further to communicate to the world.”\textsuperscript{66} His redemptive act is the focal point of history, the climax of the drama, on which the whole ‘play’ hinges. With reference to the temporal unfolding of human culture, it becomes clear that the earthly life of Jesus is not a “closed, finite thing,” but instead limitless in its meaning within the many forms of culture and further “universalized” by the church.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{64} Theology of History, 21.
\textsuperscript{65} GL1, 302.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Theology of History, 72.
Universalism and Plurality

The implications here for a theological phenomenology of art are manifold, but perhaps the most important is the unique emphasis on the particular “form” in relation to the Christ-form. The starting-point of Balthasar’s *A Theology of History* is the age-old tension between the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the universal. When it comes to philosophy and even theology, the “pole” of abstract universal essences is often brought to the fore, which “inhibit[s] the free play” of the historical-material pole. Thus the freedom of the human agent is obscured, a freedom just as “necessary” as any timeless ideal. In the Christian synthesis, however, the exaltation of Christ as saviour of all mankind (which implies a kind of “universal” character) must always be understood within the context of the divine descent into the “concrete” world of human existence. One man becomes the *concrete* “norm” of humanity, in an ontological, historical and ethical sense, not just an abstract principle or archetype but the unique revelation of the eternal God within human culture. It is Christ’s unique, particular existence—bounded in space and time in first-century Palestine, fulfilling the prophecies of Israel, and of course culminating in his death, Resurrection and Ascension—that makes him the “living center of history,” unfolding the wisdom of the eternal *Logos* (the Greek ideal) not in abstract teachings but theodramatic action.

How does Christ experience temporality? Christ’s earthly existence is characterized by “uninterrupted reception” of the will of the Father, mediated through

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68 Ibid., 26.
the Spirit, which is the pattern for our own, “feminine” mission of responsive obedience. He “receives” time from God, not anticipating or ‘grasping’ knowledge of the future but allowing events to play out in the fullness of time, even the “hour” of his Passion. He is the central actor in the theo-drama, and yet this is not a scripted play that already pre-exists in its totality but is “conceived, produced and acted all in one.” Each “scene” of his life is received in its originality in moment-by-moment inspiration.\(^6^9\) The individual Christian, exhorted to continue in faith, hope and love, must imitate Christ in precisely this sense – not imitation of a timeless archetype, which would be impossible, but conformity to the divine-human High Priest who in his experience of human time “is able to sympathize with our weakness” (Heb. 4:15). Christ is the Idea who gives shape to the “mission” of our lives as it unfolds each moment; and yet he is not an abstraction but fully human, acting in perfect freedom.

Christ’s mode of time, characterized by “moment-by-moment realization” of the will of the Father, is the perfect confluence of contemplation and action, and here again as in the theological aesthetics we have a model for the saint. There are paradoxes which emerge: Christ acts as a (perfect) free agent, and yet the “Old Covenant” which he fulfils is like his biography written before he was born. This is not a contradiction, however, so much as a mystery; the recapitulation of all history, including the story of Israel but expanding outwards and backwards to the history of the entire world, in the unique life of the Son. In fact, through this one life, the whole of existential human

\(^{6^9}\) Ibid., 33.
freedom and decision-making is not compromised, but in fact legitimated as it is given a
divine “scale of reference.”

Traditional Platonic and Aristotelian approaches to the tension between the universal and the particular are ultimately insufficient. Abstraction is precluded: Christ Incarnate is himself the “world of ideas,” a universale concretum et personale who “frames” the whole of human historical reality from within. This specific existence is, in the present time, “universalized” in veiled form through the sacraments. For there is a “mystery-presence” of Christ in the sacraments, wherein he “interpret[s], reveal[sg] and bestow[s] his earthly life” to believers; in this way the totus of his life becomes a shaping archetype, drawing the Church into a cruciform pattern, perfecting it in holiness, love and (eschatological) hope. This process is matched by one where the Spirit guides particular individuals in the Church—the saints, notable for their robust and individual expressions of Christlikeness—to come forth with their unique “concrete supernatural mission” at precisely the right point in history. Francis, Ignatius, Teresa—for Balthasar, such figures emerge in particular historical periods as the “right and relevant interpretation of the Gospel” for that time, proof in human form of the living tradition which, in the power of the Spirit, guides and leads the Church.

For Balthasar, the individual Christian “must live in time,” not anticipating the will of the Father but living in readiness, obedient and discerning as he lives out his unique mission, and continually “broken open” to God in “faith and prayer.” The context for this openness is the “bridal mystery” of the Church which is not restricted to the

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70 Ibid., 58.
71 Ibid., 92.
passionate *eros* of artists and mystics but unfolds itself within the individual soul as a feminine surrender. The pattern here is given by Mary, who reminds us that such total surrender is not just passivity but an active, forward-looking “abiding” that allows us to receive the call of God and live it out in time and history.

**Theology of Culture and Universalism**

As this brief survey has shown, for Balthasar, Christ is at the epicenter of human history. We might then expect, as Balthasar suggests Protestant “philosophers of culture” are apt to do, to hear Jesus give at least a “benevolent glance” to those things which make up human culture: philosophy, ethics, aesthetics. However, this is not the case; in the gospels at least, such independent realms are “left to their functioning” and Christ’s kingly existence is the unique “miracle in the midst” of these *praeparatio evangelica*. Balthasar’s ‘theology of culture’ might thus be described as a modified version of Barth’s: Christ the King appears in the course of history, and sets off a series of resonating “analogical tensions.” This is a suggestive paradigm that avoids a simple “Christ against culture” dichotomy without simply saying that Christ affirms human cultural expressions (including aesthetics) without radically calling them into question.

Thus the intimation of the reconciliation of all things in Christ allows the church as Mystical Body to confront human culture in universal terms, an orthodox “universalism.” For the message of the church is “God’s universal claim in Christ,” which
is universalized not in the numerical growth of the Christian religion but by the
proclamation in the word and flesh of the church the infinite existential mystery of the
“Christ event.” 72 This may be seen as an “unapocalyptic” theology that, in a too-strong
reaction to Bultmann and other eschatologically-oriented theologians of the
consciousness of Christ, ends up devaluing history by subsuming the “horizontal” aspect
of revelation to the “vertical”73—the perfect form has already appeared, and so there is
no subsequent progression towards the eschaton. Such a view could limit the necessity
of social action, such as the pursuit of justice and solidarity with the oppressed, as it
looks only backward and ‘upward’ to the compassionate form of Christ without looking
forward to a coming liberation. It is true that Balthasar’s concept of time is in some
respects cyclical, a sort of procession to and return from God with the Incarnation as the
unique theophany in which this analogical process is realized most fully. However, it is
precisely the diachronicity of drama as it “unfolds” which makes it an appropriate
analogue for theology; the climax is the center of the action, but the drama still
possesses a beginning and end. Insofar as the substance of the church participates in the
theo-drama, its possibilities for action in the “political and social dimensions”74 of
culture are not obscured by the irruption of the “vertical” in the historical appearance of
Christ (here again we think of Barth and the eternal “Yes”) but are in fact “universalized”
within culture as expressive “forms” imprinted with the radically involved, crucified

72 Steffen Losel, “Unapocalyptic Theology: History and Eschatology in Balthasar’s
73 Ibid., 203-204.
74 Ibid., 218.
“form” of Christ. The Christian “will realize his mission only if he truly becomes this form ... the exterior of this form must express and reflect its interior to the world in a credible manner ...”\(^75\) Thus for Balthasar the adoption of a mission takes the form of Marian disponibilité or readiness. Such “credibility” for the church (and individual Christian) as it universalizes the Christian message comes from the ongoing work of the Spirit, who con-forms the Body to the Head. This process is not solely future-oriented, as in Moltmann, but instead replicates the Christ-form in past, present and future, drawing human time into the divine, perichoretic kairos.

Returning to theological aesthetics proper, “seeing the form” in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics is thus comparable to being ‘drawn into’ a play unfolding on the stage, paying close attention to character, plot and even the smallest gestures and pieces of staging, with an eye to the larger movements of narrative and characterization as they move towards a climax and ultimate resolution. In contemplating Christ, it becomes clear that “the complexity of the form is the expression of a unity which can never be seen all at once and which is perceived only in its self-expression,”\(^76\) in the self-unfolding of Christ via the divine drama of history. This theo-dramatic development of the aesthetic encounter with the “Christ-form” (rather than a ‘static’ response) is necessary for keeping the nature of the “universal” concretissimum ens rooted in the historically contingent particularity of Christ, who “opens out” the possibilities of the mystery of Being through his earthly mission.

\(^{75}\) GL1, 28.  
\(^{76}\) Ibid., 487.
Such a theodramatic Christology coheres well with Balthasar’s notion of “archetypal experience” as developed in *Herrlichkeit.*⁷⁷ There Balthasar points to Christ’s historical experience, as well as the historical experiences of Mary, the apostles, and the church *as such* throughout history, as the measures against which ecclesial and individual faith are to be assessed. “Existential Christianity,” the normative experience of the Christian, must flow out of and ‘con-form’ to Christ’s experience of his own mission, replicated and deepened in the lives of those who have “seen the form” and been imprinted by it (the saints, apostles, Mary) and mediated by the sacramental life of the church. Christian experience of God thus cannot be “spiritualized” into abstraction; “everything depends on the effects of hearing, seeing and, especially, touching the Word of Life.”⁷⁸

Here the aesthetic categories are not just visual (“seeing”) but tactile, auditory, involving even taste and smell. Rather than suggesting an analogue with a painting or static work of visual art (as useful as such comparisons may be), these are elements present in the ritual drama of the liturgy, where bread and wine are transfigured into sacraments of the divine presence and the human senses are elevated into spiritual senses.

Participation in the ecclesial mystery is perhaps something like being immersed into a spiritual *Gesamtkunstwerk,* an embodied drama where the audience is drawn (as in the plays of Bertolt Brecht) into the action. Here again it becomes apparent how appropriate what we might term *dramatic-aesthetic* categories are as a development of theological aesthetics.

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⁷⁷ See Ibid., 310-352.
⁷⁸ Ibid., 313.
For Balthasar, human culture is knowingly or unknowingly involved in a drama which has its true resolution in Christ. All things—art, literature, science, philosophy, politics—find their fulfillment in the particular appearance of Christ in history, although they possess a "relative autonomy" on their own. This "dramatic narrative configuration"\(^79\) between Christ and culture reinterprets the Catholic understanding of the relationship between nature and grace, often expressed as *gratia perfit naturam, non supplet*: grace perfects nature, implying continuity, rather than replacing or destroying it as in some Protestant formulations.\(^80\) Balthasar posits a "dramatic tension" to the dialectical relationship between the two rather than a static ontological relationship.\(^81\) So for a Balthasarian theology of culture, God is involved in the world, but this does not reduce him to an element of a mythological system, bound to the contingencies of the creation (a tendency Balthasar identifies in both idealism and the Protestant theology of Moltmann); nor does it mean that human culture can skip over the "Christ-event" in history to an ahistorical communion with the "divine life-centers."\(^82\) Although even the secular dimensions of the "world-stage" must be "played with one eye on the Absolute,"\(^83\) within a 'natural' drama that supports a sort of 'natural' theology, this must ultimately yield to the 'supernatural' drama wherein God reveals himself through Christ to the world. (Here again the influence of Barth is apparent.) So rather than the abstract

\(^79\) Yeago, 93.

\(^80\) Balthasar, *Gl1*, 29.

\(^81\) Balthasar, *TD1*, 128.

\(^82\) Ibid., 129.

\(^83\) Balthasar, *TD1*, 129.
categories of “nature” and “grace” that sometimes emerge in theology, grace is
personified in Christ, and nature responds to the Christ-event. Since this is a drama, not
a static relationship, this ‘dramatic’ self-revelation displays a “narrative contingency,” an
element of surprise; God’s freedom is absolute, and so the redemption of the world he
effects through his Son is not ‘determined’ by logical necessity or fate but is put forth as
the only “satisfying conclusion” to the story of the cosmos. The coherence of the
drama comes in both the way it displays the design of an ‘author,’ who worked out a
beginning, rising action, climax and resolution, and in the ‘twists’ and turns of the
unfolding plot as experienced by the audience. So, too, the “action” of God displays a
coherence when viewed as a cosmic drama in which human culture is caught up, but
this does not create an ontological necessity which would make the concrete
“character” of Christ merely a necessary solution to a particular problem (a stop-gap
measure for human sin or an ontological “ground” for aspects of culture). In A Theology
of History Balthasar frames this problem of historical necessity with reference to the
play within a play in Shakespeare’s Hamlet: “The historical character of the history of
salvation is not called in question because God the Father set it in motion with the
express intention of leading up to the Son, or because the parts and scenes in it are
recapitulated by the Son, summed up and raised to their highest level of truth and
reality.”

84 Yeago, 93.  
Rather, the historical-narrative contingency of the Christ-event can only be seen after the fact as what the plot was moving towards all along; the climax cannot be “deduced” \textit{a priori} from the evidence of the Old Testament prophecies or witness of the \textit{logoi spermatikoi} in Greek or Roman philosophy.\textsuperscript{86} Rather, as in Irenaeus, the central character recapitulates the story of the whole. Human culture has its \textit{telos} in Christ, but God’s dramatic self-revelation in Christ is not deducible from human experience; the Theo-Drama is something new, the irruption into nature of a concrete, personal grace. So Christ and culture have “a real, though asymmetrical, interpretive reciprocity between them,”\textsuperscript{87} one that does not compromise the relative autonomy of ‘secular’ culture but also locates the fullness of expression of culture not in an abstract Absolute but in the concrete, universal revelation of “he who is unique.”

If “seeing the form,” the aim of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, points us towards the concrete \textit{analogia entis} who perfectly expresses God to human culture as he plays his dramatic ‘role,’ we can see how Roberto Goizueta is right to identify “seeing the form” with the mission of the ecclesial body. In Goizueta’s “theological aesthetics of liberation,” drawing on Balthasar, Jon Sobrino and Michelle Gonzalez, the fullness of the Christian revelation is precisely in the “wounded historical body” of Christ, in his particularity and concrete embodiedness.\textsuperscript{88} Such contemplation of the crucified form, in contrast to a view that makes of the body an “abstract ideal,” refocuses the attention of

\textsuperscript{86} Yeago, 94.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 99.
the ecclesial ‘body’—which is bound up, of course, with the tangible, sensible “body” at
the center of Balthasar’s aesthetic theory—on other “wounded” social bodies such as
the poor and marginalized.89 Here a christological aesthetics—centered on Christ’s
beauty-in-woundedness, manifested in the “concrete, historical, social body”90 of the
church – is persuasive not as an abstract transcendental, “incapable of generating
hope”91 but as a compelling impetus toward response to the plight of the poor, a call to
engage in the ongoing dramatic “act” of the mission of the church. The “aura” of Christ
is not an intangible, ephemeral abstraction but the “real presence” which draws even
those ‘bodies’ on the outside of society into communion with Christ.

Conclusion

Whereas a ‘static’ theological aesthetics, caught up in Kantian categories, could flatten
the drama of revelation into the simplistic universalism of the “Christ of culture”
(Tillich’s approach comes to mind) a theo-dramatic theological aesthetics configures
forms narratively. As Balthasar writes at the outset of *Theo-Drama*, aesthetic categories
can only go so far in “‘catching sight’ of the glory”: at a certain point we must “let
ourselves be drawn into its dramatic arena.”92 For “God’s revelation is not an object to
be looked at”; rather, it is an action which draws us into a responsive action.93 In such a

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89 Ibid., 114-115.
90 Ibid., 115.
91 Ibid., 119.
92 Ibid., 15.
93 Ibid.
theo-drama, “the boundary between the actor or agent and the “auditorium” is removed, and man is a spectator only insofar as he is a player: he does not merely see himself on the stage, he really acts on it.”⁹⁴ In such a paradigm, the ‘presence’ or ‘aura’ of the actor which is shared in the communion of the actor with the audience expands to include the audience, “blurring the boundaries” between subject and ‘object,’ drama and life. Here we are reminded of Francesca Aran Murphy’s comment that it is love which rests at the heart of Balthasar’s trilogy, and indeed at the epicenter of the transcendentals of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Love is participatory, drawing subjects into communion. As I have argued elsewhere, the theatre imperfectly helps us to grasp the nature of the divine “action” and human response as a spontaneous, though traditioned, reaction—an “improvised” ethics based on moment-by-moment reliance on divine love.⁹⁵

Thus although Balthasar’s theological aesthetics represent a unique, indispensable entry-point into both “theology and the arts” and the concept of Beauty as a theological category, his writings on the subject should not be divorced from his larger concern with the self-revelation of God within human culture. In the presence and communion that occur in the elevated context of the theatre between actor and audience, the unfolding of plot as it moves towards a climax, the assumption of “roles,” and the interrelationship of the “horizontal” and the “vertical” in the ontology of the theatre,

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⁹⁴ Ibid., 18.
Balthasar found a way of understanding theology that not only deepens his theological aesthetics but points toward a robust Catholic “theology of culture” that would preserve both divine freedom and human flourishing. Humanity is called to play a role in the divine-human theo-drama, by seeing and living into the mission of God as intrinsically related to the form it has taken in history as well as its eschatological trajectory. Such a “dramatic-narrative” configuration of God and humanity, Christ and culture, develops more fully a theology of art as a human activity which must unfold in relation to Christ, the supreme masterpiece.
Müsset im Naturbetrachten
Immer eins wie alles achten.
Nichts ist drinnen, nichts ist draußen;
Denn was innen, das ist außen.
So ergreifet ohne Säumnis
Heilig öffentlich Geheimnis!

You must, when contemplating nature,
Attend to this, in each and every feature:
There’s nought outside and nought within,
For she is inside out and outside in.
Thus will you grasp, with no delay,
The holy secret, clear as day.

from Goethe, *Epirrhema* (c. 1819),
trans. Christopher Middleton

We shall never learn what—is called—swimming, for example, or what it calls for,—by reading a treatise on swimming. Only the leap into the river tells us what is called swimming. The question—“What is called thinking”—can never be answered by proposing a definition of the concept *thinking*, and then diligently explaining what is contained in that definition.¹

Martin Heidegger, from *What is Called Thinking?*

As Heidegger suggests in the second quote presented above, to know the truth about swimming, one cannot just study it from afar. To understand it, you must leap (*Sprung*) into the river. Likewise, to know Being one must leap into its source and origin (*Ursprung*)—for there is no way of conceiving of it or analyzing it scientifically or rationally that can truly bring us into its wondrous depths. In taking the leap, the thinker

¹ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 21.
passes “unto the Origin itself,” as one commentator puts it.\(^2\) Thus the pursuit of authentic thinking, then, is inherently risky: for "the man who does not dare to jump into the truth will never attain the certainty that truth in fact exists."\(^3\)

This Heideggerian image of the river of truth is echoed in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological project, particularly in the third part of his great triptych, the *Theo-Logic*. Having examined Beauty (*The Glory of the Lord*) and Action (*Theo-Drama*), Balthasar turns his attention to the nature of Truth. For Balthasar, like Heidegger, in order to know whether truth exists, one must first know what it is—though Balthasar answers the question theologically, moving a step beyond Heidegger in his plumbing of the depths of Being. As we have seen, Balthasar links truth back to "elemental wonderment over the sheer fact of existence,"\(^4\) which he characterizes as the origin of both thought and art. Truth consists in the twofold realization "first, that being appears; second, that being appears." For Balthasar, "truth consists in unveiling," in the phenomenality of the ‘appearance’ which manifests Being.\(^5\) But to answer the initial question about ‘what truth is’ is impossible abstractly or from the outside. Rather, the question of truth is (much like the question "does she love me?") best answered from within the relationship, from (to use Balthasar’s Heideggerian metaphor) "diving into the current”—and not just to jump in initially, but to keep swimming, to “daily ask anew

\(^3\) Ibid., 25.
\(^4\) TL1, 24.
\(^5\) TL1, 37.
what truth is.” “Man swims in the river with his head lifted clear, aware of Being’s unlimited horizon, its truth and goodness.”

This chapter investigates once again the “origin” of the work of art with reference to Balthasar’s understanding of not just beauty (ch. 2-5) and the dramatic (ch. 7) but truth, where artistic experience is in fact a form of knowing. Here Balthasar’s approach echoes that of another post-Heideggerian thinker, Hans-Georg Gadamer. One of the central tasks of Gadamer’s Truth and Method is the quest for an adequate definition of the term “understanding” (Verstehen). Intriguingly, Gadamer investigates this basic structure of human knowledge not by taking scientific or abstractly conceptual “ways of knowing” as normative but through a sustained phenomenological analysis of our experience (Erfahrung) of a work of art. As Gadamer writes, “everyone knows” that in “encounters with art,” including listening to musical performances, viewing evocative paintings, and reading great works of literature, the “meaning” of the work is not closed off or exhausted in one sitting. Rather, the meaning of a great artwork is transformative, instructive, and ongoing, involving initiation into a interpretive process—a dialogue. In other words, experience of art can become a model for our essentially hermeneutical, dialogical experience of the world.

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6 TL 1 4, 82.
8 Ibid., xxvii.
Though he is not as explicit as Gadamer in his exposition of this theme, Balthasar also recognizes that “the perception of a work of art has to do with taste and enjoyment, but it is also in fact a form of cognition.” Art is a distinctive way of knowing, and as such it has a unique value for theological method. What, then, is the precise relationship between aesthetic “understanding” such as one experiences in regarding a work of art and “religious understanding,” the knowledge proper to faith and theology? Can religious faith and/or theological inquiry be thought of, after Gadamer, as analogous to our multifaceted, hermeneutical experience of works of art? As we have seen, Balthasar sought to demonstrate the relevance of “aesthetic” categories for theology, with his emphasis on “seeing the form” of Christ through the historical “forms” of art, literature, metaphysics, and the Christian Scriptures. The previous chapters have rehearsed the way that, with the artwork as central motif, Balthasar offers a phenomenology of revelation centered on the elusive term “glory,” adumbrating a deep “consonance” between earthly, inner-worldly beauty and divine disclosure. In a methodology which seems to display similarities to Gadamer’s approach, theological knowledge thus becomes analogous to aesthetic knowledge—to see with the eyes of faith requires a transformative relationship with the artistic “form of forms,” God made manifest in the flesh of Christ and visible in part through the manifold of other cultural forms – insofar as one subscribes to Balthasar’s integrative aesthetic-dramatic configuration of all forms in relation to Christ, the form par excellence. Aesthetics is not just a matter of pure subjectivity, but from front to back is characterized by dialogue and encounter—

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ultimately a “dialogical structure between the believer and the revelation of God out of love for humanity.” As Jason-Paul Bourgeois has suggested, Balthasar (and Gadamer) thus together offer a kind of “aesthetic hermeneutics”—a way of knowing and understanding that does not try to think things in abstraction, but in a phenomenological vein “jumps” into the river.

**Theo-Logic and Phenomenology**

In order to fully understand Balthasar’s understanding of truth and disclosure, it is thus necessary to penetrate beyond the theological aesthetics to the final movement in Balthasar’s great triptych, the theological logic. Balthasar’s explicit goal in the first volume of *Theo-Logic*, which in contrast to the second two volumes was re-published without alteration in 1985 as it was in 1947, is to uncover a "phenomenology of truth." While the later volumes take a more expressly Trinitarian and biblical approach to defining truth, *Wahrheit der Welt (Truth of the World)* is self-consciously philosophical rather than theological, treating "philosophical concepts from a philosophical point of view." It thus represents the clearest example of Balthasar as philosopher and phenomenologist. For Balthasar, such an approach is a necessary prologue to theological articulation, for philosophy and theology are not diametrically opposed but rather the latter is the "origin" and "end" (*principium et finis*) of the former. In *Theo-

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11 Nichols, *Say it is Pentecost*, 1.
12 *TL* 1, 11.
Logic, Balthasar aims to describe "the relationship between the structure of creaturely truth and the structure of divine truth" in a way analogous to the correspondence between worldly "beauty" and divine "glory" in the Aesthetics.\textsuperscript{13}

For Gadamer, the “truth” which art discloses comes not from scientific interrogation, but from attentive, ongoing engagement with its form. Balthasar’s thought similarly rests on an encounter between the subject and the form, resulting in a connatural exchange whereby the two expand within each other. “Understanding” thus connotes not just verbal ‘agreement’ but a kind of tacit knowing or familiarity, and moreover is the gradual result of a process of formation (\textit{Bildung}) which incorporates both individual “experience” and the critical appropriation of “tradition” into a larger hermeneutical process. To be open(ed) to the meaning of a work of art is both to enter into dialogue with it and to bring it into conversation with the trajectory of art history.

The artwork may also offer the horizon of what Emil Brunner called “truth as encounter” in relation to the divine. For if, as Balthasar suggested, the “being of creatures is not self-enclosed but opens, beyond itself, to God,” we may also be able to speak of a divine-human dialogue in the work of art—a theophanic encounter to which receptivity, openness, and humility are appropriate responses.\textsuperscript{14} This is one of the underlying hermeneutical presuppositions of Balthasar’s ontology, even at its most philosophical:

\textsuperscript{13} TL1, 7.
\textsuperscript{14} TL1, 58.
The closer philosophy comes to the concrete object and the more fully it makes use of the concrete knowing powers, the more theological data it also incorporates, either implicitly or explicitly. After all, the supernatural takes root in the deepest structures of being, leavens them through and through, and permeates them like a breath or omnipresent fragrance.¹⁵

Bourgeois points out the way in which, for both Balthasar and Gadamer, the work of art “becomes a Thou” for the subject, allowing the subject to “enter into dialogue with the ontological “truth” that is disclosed through the artwork.”¹⁶ Both the Christian revelation and the work of art decenter the subject, bringing viewer and object into an inseparable relationship. The word dialogue is a human one, which does not fully account for the complexity of the dynamic. Taking leave of dialogicians like Martin Buber, Balthasar thus calls for a theology of dialogue that goes ‘beyond’ dialogue:

Not only are most dialogues between people hopelessly superficial and full of misunderstandings, they can also silt up, break off, bog down. And in the very place where a person unfolds himself in a lifelong exchange of love, he must draw on the power of keeping his promise from the provisions of a silent and lonely fidelity that can be found only in the inner core of his self and not in the dialogical principle per se.¹⁷

The end result of the complex and sometimes difficult play of dialogue, interpretation, and mutual lighting-up involved in experiencing art can be termed “insight”—knowledge that goes beyond mere intellectual absorption to a deeper structure of appropriation and integration. The way insight and dialogical encounter are linked in the work of art

¹⁵ TL1, 10-11.
¹⁶ Bourgeois, 2.
¹⁷ ET4, 20.
make our experience of art a paradigm for the act of knowing in general, as Gadamer suggests.  

The possibility of a theology of dialogue informed by the artwork is further illuminated in conversation with Hans Urs von Balthasar’s understanding of truth itself as dialogue and “dramatic encounter.” To say that Balthasar is a “dialogical” theologian is by no means uncontentious. Robert Doran, Richard Viladesau, and others have made persuasive cases that Balthasar’s method is in effect “intra-ecclesial” rather than dialogical, an account of Christian doctrine which serves as a kind of self-contained system rather than a methodologically open one. However, as will become apparent, Balthasar’s “dramatic-aesthetic” approach leaves ample room for dialogue, in fact placing it at the very heart of the truth of being.

Theological Aesthetics as a Way of Knowing

As we have seen in previous chapters, Balthasar’s theological aesthetics include as a major component a phenomenology of lived experience where the whole “world of images that surrounds us is a single field of significations.” Each phenomenon speaks its own, untranslatable languages rich in meaning. The supreme example Balthasar gives of

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this is a symphony by Mozart. "What does a Mozart symphony mean?" It has a
"fullness" which is inexhaustible, and an expressive power which cannot be described in
"a thousand adjectives."\textsuperscript{20} "It is charged with spirit down to the last semiquaver, it brims
over with sense and significance, not hiding it behind the sounds, but expressing
everything that could be expressed."\textsuperscript{21} We thus cannot definitively say what it "means" -
if we could, it would the mark of bad artistry, mere "program music."

For Balthasar, "the more consummate a work of art is, the more its content eludes
interpretive analysis." The work of art, if it is truly a masterpiece, becomes effectively
"infinite"; for "everything that was meant to be expressed has found its form." This
"essential mystery" illuminates the character of revelation -  \textit{mystery} is an essential and
abiding property of truth precisely in its transparency. And as Balthasar puts it, "the
name of this radiant property of truth, which overwhelms by its splendor, its indivisible
integrity, and its perfect expressive power is, in fact, none other than beauty."\textsuperscript{22} Beauty
is thus the radiance of Being permeating the image's surface. The essence of Being can
never be approached from a "bird's-eye perspective" but rather shines forth from the
object—it must be experienced (the "event of the beautiful") and desired, not
dissected.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{TL1}, 141.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 142-43.
Subsequently, knowledge can never truly vanquish or "master" the object or form (Gestalt) like a hunter falling upon its prey, but instead proceeds in wonder at its infinite irradiation and its disclosure of Being. For Balthasar, the presence of beauty, truth and being in a form such as an artwork takes the form of excess or surplus. Here again the language is close to that of Jean-Luc Marion’s “saturated phenomenon”: "This mysterious "more" is what alone enables us to appreciate works of art. Because their truth is inexhaustible, they shine from day to day with a new, never-spent freshness."24

In Balthasar’s model, the "aesthete" severs the phenomenal image from its depths, resting content with pure appearance. But cut off from its "ontological root," the "living world of signification ... withers and dies."25 Beauty degenerates into aestheticism. The images are signs and ciphers, and therefore demand to be read.

**What is Truth?**

Balthasar is perhaps best known for his seven-volume theological aesthetics, which trace a genealogy of “glory” through biblical, patristic, and classical sources. However, in his three-volume *Theo-Logic* Balthasar takes on a more philosophical question—what is the nature of truth? Unlike his approach in his theological aesthetics, Balthasar investigates this question from a philosophical, phenomenological standpoint prior to submitting it to theological consideration. What is our experience of truth? For

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24 Ibid., 143.
25 Ibid., 144.
Balthasar, truth is essentially the confluence of two complementary experiences—first, the sense of grasping, possessing, or surveying from above, and second, "the experience of being flooded by something that overflows knowledge in the heart of knowledge itself."\(^{26}\) It is not simply the case that the first experience of truth is scientific or rational, the second poetic or mystical. Rather, the processes we know alternatively as cognition, internalization, and intuition all operate in an integrative manner. “In the first experience, the subject wraps itself around the object, in the sense that when something is grasped, it finds itself inside the person who grasps it ... In the second experience, however, the subject is introduced, initiated even, into the mysteries of the object.”\(^{27}\)

For Balthasar, this "double-sided" relation is fundamental to understanding truth. In marked contrast to some contemporary philosophies, Balthasar suggests that there is a sense in which "objects exist for the sake of subjects." "Truth in the full sense is actualized only in the act of judging the truth - as the manifestness of being now possessed as such in a consciousness."\(^{28}\) Here a Kantian sense of judgment is read in concert with a Heideggerian recovery of the priority of Being in the thinking of Dasein. Truth cannot be reduced to a list of propositions, as it presupposes a relationship between knower and known. Truth is both dialogue and mystery, an act of unconcealing or unveiling with aesthetic, and of course as in Heidegger, poetic/mystical, implications.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 40.  
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 40.  
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 41.
What then, is truth, specifically the truth of art? For Balthasar, the mutual encounter of subject and object introduces an "indissoluble polarity" between the two—they "comprehend each other reciprocally." For Balthasar this "joy of exchange and reciprocal sharing" is the very essence of truth and meaning. Rather than seeing encounter with an aesthetic "form" as a closed-off meeting of a predefined "subject" with an already-delimited "object," Balthasar focuses on the way subject and object "expand" within each other in the act of knowing, a "two-sided relation" requiring a self-emptying disposition of receptivity, openness, and attentiveness. "Truth arises and consists in this duality of measuring and being measured," the creative space between subject and object, or—to take a more complex example—between two subjects. There is thus in Balthasar’s phenomenology of truth a fruitful tension between truth as 'theoria' and truth as 'poesis' or making—a place for creativity and imagination in the act of knowing.

For Balthasar, the model for such a phenomenology of truth is precisely the unique and original work of art. David Tracy echoes such a view of the "classic" work of art or masterpiece in his The Analogical Imagination:

When in the presence of any classic work of art, we do not, in fact, experience ourselves as an autonomous subject possessing certain tastes

29 Ibid., 43.
30 Ibid., 45.
31 Ibid., 41.
32 Ibid., 42.
for certain qualities confronting the expression of someone else's taste, some easily controlled qualities hidden in the work by the artistic 'genius.' Instead the authentic experience of art is quite the opposite: We find ourselves "caught up" in its world, we are shocked, surprised, challenged by its startling beauty and its recognizable truth, its instinct for the essential ... we recognize the truth of the work's disclosure of a world of reality transforming, if only for a moment, ourselves.\(^{33}\)

The kind of experience we have in viewing a great work of art does not reinforce the paradigm "a subject over against an object" (a stance of evaluation and critical distance) but rather yields to the viewing subject a mode of truth which can best be thought of as a species of “recognition” (Tracy characterizes it as being caught up, losing 'control,' the "event character of truth as a glimpse into the essential that is the real").\(^{34}\)

Lying behind Balthasar’s philosophical understanding is, of course, a theological impulse to consider the world as ‘given’ by a creating God. Balthasar unfolds this position, however, by assigning a ‘creative’ impulse not only to a divine creator but to the subject in the act of knowing:

The disclosure of being is meaningful only if it is directed to a knowing subject. We must therefore say that the object’s meaning is first fulfilled in the subject, which therefore contains the measure of the object. The subject's freedom and spontaneity include the ability, not only to apprehend truth, but also positively to bring it into being [setzen]. The work of art produced by a sculptor or a composer contains a truth whose measure lies in its creator's conception. The same thing occurs in every instance where the subject ... decides what has to be and what has to be true.\(^{35}\)

\(^{33}\) Tracy, The Analogical Imagination, 110.
\(^{34}\) Tracy, 112.
\(^{35}\) TL1, 41-42.
David Schindler has described Balthasar’s model of truth as one of “dramatic encounter.” In contrast to a model of truth where the “object” is subjugated to the knower—a “tyranny of human subjectivity”—Balthasar offers, for Schindler, a “genuine and abiding difference in the truth relation.”36 The object is not made to conform to the subject—an “identitarianism” which erases all difference—but instead “the mutual implication of truth and mystery reveals a mutual implication of unity and difference in knowledge.”37 Moreover, however, this mutual implication calls for a genuinely creative response, a kind of co-creating of truth. Thus just as the event of the beautiful must pass into the drama of self-disclosure in the theological realm, so too for Balthasar interpersonal relationships must also be dramatic and diachronic, characterized not just by a momentary, evental point of contact but an ongoing, fruitful interaction.

**Truth and the Sensorium**

If opening to the other is critical to the nature of truth, Balthasar posits, there is a certain sense in which the body and its sensorium serves as an obstacle to communion. Human knowing is, of course, essentially and necessarily “tied to a physical and organic sensorium,” a link which “does in fact hinder and obscure the pure spirituality of human knowing.”38 Yet as Balthasar intimates, it is precisely through the subspiritual gateway of the senses, which in their encounter with the Other experience the “unchosen necessity

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37 Ibid., 2-3.
38 TL1, 47.
of being broken open,” that “the life and truth of the other comes” in both an immediate and Christological sense. As we saw in the chapter on embodiment, to recover the sensorium is to recover a sense of openness. This means letting go of preconceived structures in favour of freedom, for as Balthasar writes a "ready-made framework" would wound courtesy.\textsuperscript{39} As the great literary critic George Steiner writes in his book \textit{Real Presences}, art demands \textit{cortesia}, hospitality which refuses to impose on a guest.\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, for Balthasar "the object no more knows what to expect in the space opened within the subject than a guest knows how he will be received and hosted in another's home."\textsuperscript{41}

Here we are reminded of Cecilia González-Andrieu’s model of differences as “productive sites” of dialogue and creation. Balthasar gives phenomenological and theological credence to an understanding of truth as openness and unconcealment, of “sharing,” relationality, and hospitality. The Heideggerian “disclosure of being” which occurs in experiencing an earthly form – for which a work of art is, as in the theological aesthetics, a paradigmatic example – occurs in the mode of dialogue, of a relationship of exchange, transformation, and dialogue. If the artwork discloses truth in our dialogical encounter with it, Tracy is right to connect (in Heideggerian language) the "disclosure and concealment of truth" which the artwork effects to “our realized experience of a transformative truth, at once revealing and concealing." Art unearths truth both in its

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{40} See George Steiner, \textit{Real Presences} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
\textsuperscript{41} TL1, 62.
creation and reception. The "witnessing of a work of art" is both a microcosm and a paradigmatic example of the "event of understanding," of Gadamer's *Verstehen*.42

Later in *Theo-Logic* Balthasar explicates his account of truth as encounter in theological terms with reference to "measuring" or *adequatio*. If part of the fullness of the object is its existence for subjects, the true "measure" of the object—its ontological status—must ultimately "lie in the hands of the infinite subject, God."43 For Balthasar, channeling Aristotelian teleology by way of Goethe, "the object gets its measure from the idea that God has of it .... The divine idea is in part given to the object and implanted in it along with its very existence. ... The core of this idea lies in the living center from which the acting, living and sensing being develops, displays its rich multiplicity, and unfolds historically."44 The Goethean example he gives here is of a plant, which even in the form of a seed contains the potentiality to grow into its fullness. However, the "truth" (its essence — Goethe’s *Urpflanze*) of the plant is not just this biological/physiological unfolding, but depends on the "discovery" of the subject — those able to see the world as a sacrament of the divine. Such "discovery ... is an essential component of the unveiling of the object" — for truth "is not a property inhering in the object alone."45

"When the plant is elevated in its turn into the space offered by sensory perception, it becomes able to perfect itself in a superior medium."46 Things, even non-thinking things

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42 Tracy, 101-102.
43 TL1, 56.
44 Ibid., 57.
46 Ibid., 65.
like plants, lie open and in a sense find their fullness in their apprehension by subjects both human and divine. This is one of the senses in which, for Balthasar, "the being of creatures is not self-enclosed but opens, beyond itself, to God." In a sense, “things come forth from the eye of God,” and perception (Wahrnehmung) is precisely being open to the unveiling of the radiant light which streams through being.

Here Balthasar’s Goethean roots become apparent. Goethe, in his theory of perception, called for a “delicate empiricism” (zarte Empirie) that would allow one to study the forms of nature not just on the basis of external knowledge, but from one’s inner understanding. In particular, Goethe believed that careful, self-reflective opening of oneself to the object would lead to the Ur-Phanomen, its essential, archetypal nature. Just as one opened one’s own faculties and sensitivities to the form, the world itself would freely and graciously present itself as a “holy open secret” (Heilig öffentlich Geheimnis). There is a creative aspect to this: “By contemplation of an ever-creative nature, we might make ourselves worthy of participating intellectually in her productions. Had not I myself ceaselessly pressed forward to the archetype, though at

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47 Ibid., 58.
48 For more on Balthasar’s use of Goethe’s theory of forms, see McInroy, 146.
50 This line is from Epirrhema, the poem at the beginning of this chapter. See also Saint-Pierre, 87.
first unconsciously, from an inner urge; had I not even succeeded in evolving a method in harmony with Nature?\(^{51}\)

For Goethe, a “sensory imagination” (\textit{sinnliche Phantasie}) was needed in order to access the \textit{ur-phenomenon}. Heidegger’s concern, which itself is an extension of Kantian disinterestedness, was to dissociate the object from any sense of purpose or purposiveness—theologically speaking, this disqualifies the notion that the thing could be ascribed to the ongoing work of God or the god(s) or given a use-value which would obscure its self-showing. Balthasar in a somewhat similar vein rehabilitates a Kantian model of the aesthetic object as having an end which is precisely the “ground of the possibility of the object itself”—not an external teleological end but an inner one.\(^{52}\)

A final model of truth operative in Balthasar’s nascent philosophy is an understanding of truth as mystery. The pursuit of truth in knowledge thus becomes the awakening of both subject and object in an “interplay” or “co-enabling.” As in a model of truth as dialogue, “It is not until the other enters into the space of the subject that, like Sleeping Beauty, it awakens from its slumber—at once to the world and to itself.”\(^{53}\) Truth is a radiant mystery which manifests itself both in unveiling and veiling, hiddenness and

\(^{51}\) See Seamon, \textit{Goethe’s Way of Science}.
\(^{52}\) Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, Book I, 227.
\(^{53}\) Balthasar, \textit{TL1}, 67, quoted in Goulding, 251.
revelation. This takes on a distinctly theological shape. The “truth of the Trinity” is at the heart of Balthasar’s account of truth as mystery.\(^{54}\)

By linking truth at its most basic level to mystery, “abiding otherness,” and dramatic “unveiling,” Balthasar’s thought—which takes the work of art as one of its central guiding models—preserves difference and dialogue as integral parts of human knowing. Unlike objects, the human subject is a "transparent" entity which can measure itself as well as being by its own light; ("the coincidence of being and consciousness"); the human being is "open, both to itself and to the other."\(^{55}\) In Balthasar’s estimation, inanimate objects like rocks and rivers have no such receptivity; animals are “open” in the sense of experiencing the world through their senses but possess no self-consciousness; humans, however, have the world "unlocked." For Balthasar, the appropriate ethical response to this posture of openness is receptivity, defined as a particular attentiveness, even a kind of “poverty”: "Receptivity ... not only implies this unlocking of the self to other beings" but the ability to open oneself to "the gift of their distinctive truth."\(^{56}\) Such receptivity requires hospitality, for "the object no more knows what to expect in the space opened within the subject than a guest knows how he will be received and hosted in another's home."\(^{57}\) Trying to fit the appearance of a form into a "ready-made framework" would wound courtesy.\(^{58}\)

\(^{54}\) Goulding, 246.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 44.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 45.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 62.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 49.
Here, I believe, a parallel emerges to González-Andrieu’s Peircian concepts of “firstness,” “secondness” and the interlacing of theology and art. The object—and let us begin, as does Balthasar, with a beautiful artwork—presents itself to us in its irreducible otherness, as a stranger. Yet as we invite it in—a movement of hospitality or, as in George Steiner’s writings on art, *cortesia*—we come to be familiar with it, to enter into dialogue with it.\(^5^9\) The artwork only comes to fullness in our encounter with it—it takes on a new life, “speaking” to us in an enlivening way. Our posture is one of receptivity and humility, which rather than seeking to eliminate difference embraces it as part of the beauty of being. This posture then encourages us to adopt a similarly receptive, responsive modality in conversation with the Other—to our dialogue with other human subjects, our relationship with the natural world, and our experience of God as “infinite subject.” Truth thus presents itself, in quasi-Levinasian terms, as opening oneself up to the other, which takes on an ontological (rather than strictly ethical) significance. The very being of an object, including the being of the self, “requires the comprehensive, unifying medium of reality in order to ‘let the other be,’” for “the other, whether a human being or some other object in reality, is thus revealed to me as a mystery lying well beyond all grasping concepts precisely when it reveals itself to me without any desire to hold back.”\(^6^0\)

\(^{5^9}\) Again there are resonances with Steiner’s *Real Presences.*

\(^{6^0}\) *Epilogue, 52-53.*
Balthasar goes even further than this, couching the act of truth-perception in “nuptial” terms—the event of truth requires an openness on the part of the subject which can only be described as love.°61 Truth as love means, among other things, that truth in its very essence remains a mystery. Just as we can know, but never know exhaustively, another person in our encounter with them, so our experience of aesthetic forms—particularly works of art—opens up unfathomable “depths.” Every created form “is always ‘more’ than what is projected on to the surface, and this mysterious More can also be read in a mysterious manner from that surface.”°62 This “mysterious More” applies with particular force in the case of the work of art: as Balthasar writes, “the more a great work of art is known and grasped, the more concretely are we dazzled by its ‘ungraspable’ genius.”°63 Yet the genius on display is not just that of a brilliant artist.

The truth of an artwork is thus inexhaustible; as such, it manifests a “new, never-spent freshness.”°64 This otherness and inexhaustibility, however, is not a barrier to dialogue but what makes meaningful and authentic conversation possible. In fact, for Balthasar dialogue is not a strong enough word; in both his theological aesthetics and theo-logic, a more apt term for the encounter between subject and object would be communion, with all its ecclesial and Trinitarian undertones.

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°62 GL1, 186.
°63 GL5, 622.
°64 TL1, 143.
Truth and Phenomenality

The first point of contact between subject and object is the phenomenal images [die erscheinenden Bilder]. The object shows itself in them. They in turn present themselves uninvited to the subject. The world is composed of these images as its material. The images are altogether manifest. To deny them is impossible ... [yet] things cannot be as simple as the images suggest.65

Balthasar sets out a complex counter-example of the dangers of a certain type of phenomenology. One might think of the images as pure appearance [Erscheinung], without essence, depth or law "in themselves." In such a schema, the image cannot self-interpret; but precisely this "exaggerated manifestness" suggests that it is meaningful, in need of interpretation. "The images unfold from one another in series and chains," which appear meaningless on the surface but, when seen in series or as phases, disclose a "total form."66 The subject must then "nourish" the images with meaning and "bestow" or "confer" essence and existence upon them. But this is a dangerous task, one which seems to turn the object into a projection, engulfed by the subject.67 The seeming depth disclosed by the object becomes an "alien, artificial mystery," the elucidation of a "ghostly" apparition.

Balthasar suggests instead that truth subsists not in the appearance "as such," nor "behind" the appearance, but in the relation between "the appearance" and "the thing

65 Ibid., 132.
66 Ibid., 134.
67 Ibid., 133-138.
that appears."\(^{68}\) The image is an ex-pression, a creation. Yet Balthasar still maintains that it is not the depth itself. "It can, like a painting, employ perspective to represent the third dimension that it itself lacks." It is an expression because it expresses something else, possessed of a "plasticity" which allows it to disclose being.

But how can the subject do this? For Balthasar, man's "creative handling of the truth" is enabled by the analogy of being, which "allots to the creature something of his creative power even in the domain of truth."\(^{69}\) This Balthasar terms the "analogy of creative knowledge," which reveals that the ideal archetype in a form is in the "safekeeping" of God.\(^{70}\) Man is thus not the possessor, but the administrator (\emph{Mitverwalter}) of truth. The creativity inherent to knowledge consists of sighting the "concealed" image - the ideal archetype—in a person or form. This ideal reality is not an external abstraction, but is the mirror-image of the object "as it could be."\(^{71}\) It subsists in love. The truth rises, while nonbeing (including false images) sinks back into chaos. "Beyond the power of the imagination [\emph{Einsbildungskraft}], but not without it, there occurs what can be characterized as "formation" [\emph{Bildung}]: the constant, never-concluded process in which the recognizer ascribes to real things their valid essence behind their place in the world of images."

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 138.
\(^{69}\) Ibid., 119.
\(^{70}\) Ibid., 120.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 116.
Accordingly, truth cannot be thought of apart from God; though propositions may imitate truth, the primordial "truth of the self-disclosure of being" is inseparable from "the fundamental movement of love."\textsuperscript{72} Love breaks down worldviews that seek closure from "enlarging and complementary vistas"; it resists "sectarian" impulses to declare a certain truth as right and all others as wrong. It renounces "partial truth" in favour of the whole truth; it thus leads us to affirm, along with Balthasar’s book of the same name, that truth is \textit{symphonic}.

Scola helpfully characterizes Balthasar’s understanding of truth in terms of polarities, derived from the “polarity-structure” of Being he inherited from Gustav Siewerth: truth as nature; truth as liberty; truth as mystery; and finally, truth as participation.\textsuperscript{73} To this list can be added, with particular reference to the rest of \textit{Theo-Logic}, is the dynamic of truth as love: “Indeed, insofar as the mystery of love lies ‘behind’ the truth, all truth is reducible to it, derives its meaning as truth from it, and, far from mastering and explaining it as mystery, must fall silent in humility before it. At the same time, truth irradiates mystery, and it is the very essence of truth to manifest this radiant mystery through itself.”\textsuperscript{74} The response Balthasar calls for is receptivity, \textit{Gelassenheit}—defined simply as “an opening of one’s self by grace toward the revelation of God” which “allows for entrance into the intrinsic mystery of truth itself.”\textsuperscript{75} The “truth of the Trinity”

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{73} Scola, 43.
\textsuperscript{74} Goulding, 250.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 246-7.
is at the heart of Balthasar’s account of truth as mystery— and thus to speak of theological truth is not to speak of an abstract, but to evoke and invoke the truth of eternal love.

Truth, for Balthasar, involves the Triune God’s free self-disclosure to the knowing subject who “awakens to knowing in wonder and amazement.” This occasions not just opening, but gratitude. Beauty, wonder, and amazement, paired with love and desire, are creative impulses which (in Elaine Scarry’s terms) cannot help but “beget” more beauty, goodness, and truth. Art, conceived in such a system, becomes thus in a theological sense a locus of truth “setting-itself-to-work” (in Heidegger’s terminology) — the truth of the world and the truth of God in a dialogical encounter. Truth is, succinctly, "an opening beyond itself," and so artistic truth is simultaneously an opening to the world and to revelation. This phenomenology of truth thus complements a theology of art at the deepest level.

Conclusion

Previous studies of Balthasar’s relationship to art and Being have not ventured far into the *Theo-Logic*. However, its phenomenological treatment of truth—a philosophical method which opens onto worldly truth as the truth as the Trinity—has much to offer a

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76 Ibid., 246.
77 Ibid., 246.
78 TL1, 39.
Balthasarian phenomenology of art. If the origin of the work of art is ultimately not just Being, but Christ who as ultimate “form” casts light on all derivative earthly forms, Truth itself is deeply (and dramatically) connected to Beauty. Artistic truth thus becomes, like artistic beauty, not just an ontological reality but a theological one, each painting making a wager on the infinite. *Theo-Logic* fills out the central analogy Balthasar employs in his aesthetics: that of the experience of the great work of art. A beautiful painting or symphony catches us up both in a miraculous event of rapture and *ekstasis* and reveals to us in a flash like lightning the hidden structure of Being—namely, beauty, truth, and goodness united by love. Our knowing of the world “in spirit and truth” intimates the uncreated theological (and ultimately christological) light in which we live and move and the dramatic relation we have to this supereminent form.
Conclusion

We can now draw some conclusions based on our tour through Balthasar’s triptych. Balthasar is best known for his seven-volume theological aesthetics. Yet for Balthasar, making the modern “theory of beauty” (i.e. ‘philosophical’ aesthetics as conceived of in the “age of German Idealism”) pass without interruption into theological language is as dangerous a path as a theology bereft of the beautiful.¹ The (theological) aesthetic must rather ‘open out’ onto the dramatic—moving from an account of the “perception” of “divine self-manifestation” to its determinate “content” in the unique contours of the Christian gospel.² As Francesca Aran Murphy notes, the aesthetic is in Balthasar’s trilogy a kind of “perforation” which allows theology to be filled (or, in another analogy, “framed”) in a particular way—yet of itself, it is “contentless.”³ This may sound harsh—yet it is crucial to understanding the overall thrust of Balthasar’s thought, which moves (particularly in terms of his trilogy) from a theological aesthetics to a theo-dramatics (Theo-Drama). As the first four chapters argued, “seeing the form” does not rest with characterizing the perception of earthly forms—including beautiful works of art—as vehicles of direct divine communication, but is from front to back directed toward Christ, God’s supreme masterpiece who stands above all “this-worldly” forms and figurations. How does this inform dialogue between theology and the arts? For

¹ GL1, 79-80.
² Ibid., 11; 37.
Balthasar, “the ‘origin’ or starting point for his dialogue [is] Jesus Christ,” not the world of the arts in which he was immersed and from which he drew his theological vocabulary. As Oliver Davies writes, in Balthasar’s project “the analogy with beauty or art can only be pressed so far, since the ‘glory’ of revelation is not simply an ‘object’ of aesthetic contemplation and appreciation, but also a dramatic encounter with a sovereign and infinite freedom.” Rather than charting a broad, easily navigable Northwest Passage from the arts to theology, for Balthasar the subtle “transition from the arts to theology” thus happens at the precise point of the perfect, unique work of art that is Christ—particularly in the theodramatic contours of his life, death, and resurrection—and only then moves outward in an integrative manner into the vast arena of art, culture, and philosophy. This is one answer to the fissure between Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and the discipline which has followed in his wake.

Chapters 2-4 explored precisely these themes with reference to Heidegger and the Western metaphysical tradition. In chapter 6, we read again of Christ as the form of beauty which relativizes all others who provides the dramatic, hermeneutic key to understanding glory as mediated through culture: “What we know to be most proper to God—his self-revelation in history and the Incarnation—must now become for us the

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6 “Theology and Aesthetic,” 64.
very apex and archetype of beauty in the world, whether men see it or not.”  

The accent falls not on human creativity, but on “seeing the form” of Christ who is himself the analogy of being made concrete in human history.

As we saw in chapter 7, a third movement in Balthasar’s thought completes the movement from beauty (theo-aesthetics) and freedom (theo-dramatics) to truth (theo-logic), all within the larger project of restoring an authentically Christian doctrine of Being. Here we are brought to the ever-contested boundary between philosophy and theology. If beauty is "the transparency, through the phenomenon, of the mysterious background of being" and the Ignatian “eternal 'ever more' implicit in the essence of every being," it is inseparable from truth—the truth of the world and the truth of the utterly free God acting in human history.  

For Balthasar, truth is essentially mystery—characterized, as in Heidegger, by a pattern of veiling and unveiling, which for Balthasar takes the form of a dialogical, even nuptial relationship between knower and known. This relational understanding of truth, where subject and object “expand” within each other, is grounded in a sense of both the inexhaustible movement of giving implied in the analogia entis and to an abiding relationship to God as “infinite subject.” In brief, Balthasar sees "Being's opening in truth" not as an "arelational" opening "in itself" but as an "opening for," a gift or offering.  

As such, truth is at its core a theo-logical

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7 GL1, 69.
8 TL1, 223.
9 Ibid., 217.
movement, an act where everything exists at every moment in dependent relation to the triune God.

The dependency and radical openness of this relationship are perhaps best summed up not in Balthasar’s magisterial theological-philosophical treatises, but in his poetic, even mystical image of the “heart of the world,” which gathers ontology into divine self-bequeathal: “the opening of the Heart is the handing over of what is most intimate and personal for the use of all.”

The “throbbing” pulse of Being is the pulse of this divine heart, echoing through the temporal fluctuations of history. Here, of course, the language is sacramental and ecclesial, a symbolic evocation of the piercing of Christ’s heart on the cross where blood and water flow—an account of the birth of the Church. Balthasar is, as his writings on Mary, the Petrine office, prayer, the saints, and the nature of tradition make abundantly clear, a theologian pro ecclesia. The body of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church; it mediates the fullness and uniqueness of the form of Christ for the world. Yet the self-giving, nourishing stream which flows through the Church is not just symbolic of a “Christian” truth narrowly considered but Balthasar’s answer to the question of Being, the question of all humanity; the answer for the “authentic metaphysical question” (in the form that it occupied Heidegger, “Why is

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there anything at all and not simply nothing?”) is, quite simply, love—particularly the
love displayed in the “drama” of Father, Son, and Spirit poured out into the cosmos.¹¹

In terms of truth, both artistic and religious, Balthasar’s thought can even be thought of
as “postmodern” in that it embraces plurality and even genuine difference within the
catholicity of tradition.¹² Cyril O’Regan sees in the theological aesthetics four loci for the
“pluralization of tradition.” The first are the “lay” and “clerical” figures outlined in
volumes two and three, each representing not just partial aspects of Balthasar’s own
overarching theology but rather “individuated styles of theologizing, irreducibly distinct
perspectives on Christian mystery.”¹³ Next is the genealogy of metaphysics and
mysticism in the fourth and fifth volumes. Third, the panorama of the biblical evidence
(both Old and New covenants). The fourth is the Prolegomenon itself, which serves to
explain the “inductive and phenomenological” data of the other three loci.¹⁴ For
O’Regan, this plurality written deep into Balthasar’s theological method is a sign of the
simultaneous unity and stratification of the Christian tradition, a recognition that
“tradition is not a seamless garment, and shows evident signs of tear.”¹⁵ The mystery of
Christ elicits multiple perspectives, some all but incommensurable, and this diversity is
to be embraced rather than stifled. Of course, rather than veering into the pure

¹¹ GL5, 613.
¹² Cyril O’Regan, “Balthasar Between Tübingen and Postmodernity,” Modern
Theology 14:3 (July 1998): 327.
¹³ Ibid., 327.
¹⁴ Ibid., 327.
¹⁵ Ibid., 328.
differance of postmodern thought Balthasar’s theology is organized with “centripetal” force around the mystery of Christ, leading not to an unrestrained, and thus meaningless, pluralism but a catholic affirmation that “truth is symphonic.”

This is only the briefest of surveys of our appropriation of Balthasar’s thought. However, it already gives direction to a contemporary “Balthasarian” approach to the question of art as a locus theologicus. Balthasar’s thought tends toward a Heideggerian phenomenology of art which emphasizes both the mystery of Being and its irruption or disclosure in the artwork, but also, in a grand and deliberate “misremembering” of Heidegger, its metaphysical orientation toward the Christian gospel. Heidegger helps restore something of elemental wonder (thaumazein) to art. Yet his philosophy, predicated on the ontological difference, is not strong enough to sustain authentic wonder. For Balthasar, the polarity between Being and being finds its highest expression in the “fruitfulness” of interpersonal and Trinitarian love. To be "open to the original mystery of Being" is not just to be held out into the nothing, but to be caught up in Dante’s “Love which moves the Sun and the other stars.”

If Balthasar’s theological aesthetics does in fact provide the seedbed for a theology of art, I suggest that it does so not by detailing a “theology of art” in the sense most

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16 Ibid., 330-334.
17 Hopefully O’Regan’s upcoming volume on Balthasar’s “misremembering” of Heidegger will confirm some of the hypotheses in this dissertation.
18 Epilogue, 57.
19 Dante, Paradiso, Canto XXXIII lines 142-145. In other words, “love is the final truth of being.” See Goulding, 248.
contemporary theologians have adopted but rather by yielding a theologically-inflected phenomenology of the work of art—one which grows out of his metaphysical vision of the created order as a dynamic array of splendid, unfolding forms. In short, such a theological phenomenology of art amounts to a revised Heideggerian account of “appearances” embedded in a rich understanding of the analogy of being. It is precisely this conceptual model of the work of art as the overwhelming, ‘excessive’ manifestation of the depths of Being that Balthasar takes up as the controlling analogy of his The Glory of the Lord and develops with reference to the radiant “form” of Christ, though he employs this leitmotif in a number of other texts as well.

Balthasar is, throughout his work, interested in exploring the idea of an “inner analogy” between beauty and divine glory, which rather than the “demolition of the bridge between natural and supernatural beauty” allows of a certain affinity between them. However, “seeing the form” is not just a matter of renewing ontology, i.e. of developing a new (for example, neo-scholastic) kind of philosophical aesthetics via the analogy of

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20 Though as might be imagined, the notion of a “theological phenomenology” is not popular among phenomenological purists: see, for example, Matthew I. Burch, “Blurred vision: Marion on the ‘possibility’ of revelation,” International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion (2010) 67: 157-171. “Phenomenology does not deal with logical, metaphysical, empirical, or statistical possibilities—in fact, the phenomenological use of the term cannot refer to any kind of possibility that is defined from the third-person perspective. Rather, in keeping with its principle that all claims must be grounded in intuition, phenomenology must refer to possibilities that can be identified and clarified from the first-person perspective.” Burch writes in response to Merold Westphal’s claim that theology can indeed benefit from a “hermeneutical” phenomenology, the kind he attributes to Jean-Luc Marion.

21 Gl1, 35.
being, but a re-thinking of what human experience of glory means for the subject—namely the “experience of faith,” a theory of the simultaneous “vision” and “rapture” enabled by the radiant “light of faith” which breaks forth from the primal form. This subjectivity takes on a particular clarity when explicated using one of the main underlying metaphors of the first volume of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics—the figure with which we began our discussion of earthly beauty and all-transcending glory—that of the work of art. A common view holds that appreciating a work of art is primarily a matter of subjective taste. For Balthasar, however, such a view of art is for those who have “not yet acquired objective criteria for the evaluation of works of art”: the young who have not yet learned to discern what is of aesthetic value.\(^{22}\) Analogously, seeing the glory of God in Christ is not solely about subjective appreciation, as in a certain tradition of philosophical aesthetics—it is not centered in the subject, but in the object, Christ who himself possesses and displays what philosophers of art (e.g. Clive Bell and Roger Fry in the early twentieth century) call “significant form.”\(^{23}\)

This is an aspect of Balthasar’s thought which has been articulated and further developed by Aidan Nichols, who takes the artwork as a primary model for understanding the mystery of the Incarnation. The painting, or symphony, is a “form” in which truth and beauty are perceptible—an indissoluble form which demands to be seen on its own, unique terms. It thus provides a valuable analogy of “the disclosure of

\(^{22}\) Balthasar, GL1, 178.

\(^{23}\) Nichols, Art of God Incarnate, 89.
God in Christ.” To behold a painting is to understand it with respect to its context (what Nichols calls an iconology), its characteristic “style” (which provides clues as to its origin) and above all, its unity of expression and articulation—the unique world it opens up to us. Yet having seen the painting, its significance is not exhausted—rather, it demands multiple viewings, in order to see it in new ways, with fresh connections and better-trained eyes. “The more a great work of art is known and grasped, the more concretely are we dazzled by its ‘ungraspable’ genius.”

Christ, in the perfectly meaningful, expressive unity of his ‘significant form,’ discloses the nature of the divine Artist. The unity of his form emerges from the Scriptures, even in their multiplicity of perspectives and authors. He is the image, or icon, or ‘artwork’ of God—the “characteristic qualities” of his actions reveal a particular “style,” which in turn shows his relationship to the Father. Yet in the “clarification” or “unveiling” that occurs in seeing his form, there is simultaneously a “deepening of mystery.” “An artist will conceal himself in his work as well as reveal himself.” The new world he opens is the infinite, ungraspable mystery of God’s (Trinitarian) love. “The image of Christ cannot be ‘taken in’ as can a painting: its dimensions are objectively infinite... it is, nevertheless, an image and a form, the Image of all images and the Form of all forms and, as such, it possesses an evidential power of its own which it itself communicates.”

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24 Nichols, Art of God Incarnate, 5.
25 GL1, 186.
26 Nichols, 117.
27 Nichols, The Word Has Been Abroad, 38.
28 GL1, 512.
As we have seen, this pairing of “evidential power” and “revelation in hiddenness”\textsuperscript{29} is a critical theme of Balthasar’s ‘aesthetic’ approach to divine beauty, a theological development on a phenomenological theme. For Heidegger, like Balthasar, truth is a matter of the simultaneous veiling and “unveiling of being,” allowing things to show themselves as they appear rather than according to some pre-existing schema. Yet in the phenomenological tradition, with its emphasis on the world of phenomena open to the senses, it is not always clear that we are not in a world of pure phenomenality, “a world of images as sheer surface.”\textsuperscript{30} Balthasar sees the temporally unfolding forms of the cosmos as not just playing on our senses, but truly and authentically disclosing the mysterious (theological) depths of being.

A light irradiates the form itself, and the same light points to the reality that is both appearing in that form and simultaneously transcending it. The inner polarity of the transcendent ontic property of beauty lies in this duality of luminous form resting in itself and the innate tendency of form to point beyond itself to an (actual) being illuminated in it.\textsuperscript{31}

The same is supereminently true of the Christ-form, which exegetes (John 1:14) the “incomprehensible” mystery of God—it is not just a ‘mere’ appearance, but the genuine presence of the depths.\textsuperscript{32} The cross-shaped form of the Word made flesh, as a locus of unsurpassable divine glory, is a sign that effects what it signifies, but more than this it is a self-authenticating “disclosure of God” himself.

\textsuperscript{29} Nichols, \textit{The Word Has Been Abroad}, 38.
\textsuperscript{30} Nichols, \textit{Redeeming Beauty}, 63.
\textsuperscript{31} Epilogue, 60.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
If art originates, for Balthasar, as an “act of homage before the glory of what exists,” the primary word which must be used to describe its origin is wonder. “The elemental experience of the mystery of reality is expressed by the Greek ‘wonder’ (thaumazein), in the face of the form of existent things, their order and radiant beauty. Behind the question concerning their appearance (eidos) there is the much more bewildering one as to why anything should exist rather than simply nothing at all.”

“Before the beautiful ... the whole person quivers. He not only ‘finds’ the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it.” When this subjective experience occurs as the result of genuine confrontation with not just earthly beauty but the dramatic, historical revelation of the Triune God, this is the power of a phenomenon which demands the name of not just beauty, but glory—that irreducibly other, uncontainable splendour which breaks forth at the advent of divine presence. As one author puts it, because the beauty of the Word “incarnate, crucified, and resurrected ... fulfills and surpasses all purely inner-worldly forms of beauty,” it is best described as glory—the appearance of a form which demands reverence and awe. True theology begins and ends in doxology, a posture of worship and obedience. For Balthasar, though the language is ultimately inadequate and it is wiser to speak of a “consonance” between beauty and glory, it is clear that the analogy to be

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33 GL5, 432.  
34 GL1, 247.  
35 Mongrain, 61.  
36 Ibid.
drawn between the two is a risk worth taking, for it yields a “theological aesthetics”—not an “aesthetic theology”—whereby we might better understand the way in which, just as the “contours” of Christ’s unique form “emerged” to the apostles and eye-witnesses of his life, death and resurrection, “suddenly and in an indescribable manner the ray of the Unconditional breaks through.”

37 GL1, 33.


———. *The word has been abroad: a guide through Balthasar’s aesthetics; No Bloodless Myth: a guide through Balthasar’s dramatics; and Say it is Pentecost: a guide through Balthasar’s logic.* Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1998-2001.


