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Christian Kitsch: A Preliminary Examination of Christian Materialism through Theological Aesthetics and Cultural Politics

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Abstract

As a massive phenomenon animating the world of cultural politics, kitsch sensibility emerges in Western Christian materialism as a means to easily mediate genuine, if sentimental, expressions of religious devotion. Scorned by others as the manipulation of “bad taste,” reverence through kitsch in contemporary religious art would be better taken to reflect a crisis in modern religious thought. This thesis employs the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar to argue that modern Christian kitsch is the active mistaking of poor theological quality as a source of beauty, which is primarily felt as the sensibility of losing *dynamis*. Its evolution through late capitalism conveys an irreversible yet inevitable mutation of faith, understood by Slavoj Žižek as the “suspension of belief” in contemporary Christian consumerism and artful practice. Anticipating the restoration of quality is a reorientation of the *imitatio Christi* for the articulation of a new theological aesthetics.

Keywords

Balthasar, theological aesthetics, *dynamis*, kitsch, art, religion and culture, Žižek, theology, quality, bad taste

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Preface

“Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror,”

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), Duino Elegies

“The quality is so good you can’t even see it!”

A BestBuy Sales Associate on televisions

Chapter 1

1 Introduction

In this abridging, introductory chapter, I contend that kitsch sensibility at large controls the presentation of evangelical Western Christian media, values, and practices.

1.1 A Brief Overture

One tacit law in the arena of contemporary culture, as intuited by Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts, is as follows: “*Savages are attracted to kitsch; if you are attracted to kitsch it is because you are savage.*”¹ Kitsch, more commonly known as ‘bad taste,’ has garnered a unique and nuanced reputation ever since Hermann Broch’s (1886-1951) notorious manifesto in the first half of the twentieth-century. Art associated with the aesthetic is, in his opinion, ethically and morally “evil,”² and further implicates anyone who is deeply compelled to consume and enjoy kitsch as “a malefactor who profoundly desires evil.”³

Jumping fifty-six years after the publication of Broch’s impulsive essay, Holliday and Potts warn that Western society is right now “on the point of drowning in a sea of kitsch.”⁴ This warning, especially when combined with Broch, takes us further than Romanian cultural critic Matei Călinescu’s (1934-2009) announcement that the presence

¹ Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts, *Kitsch! Cultural politics and taste* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2012), 240.

² Hermann Broch, “Notes on the problem of kitsch,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Universe Books, 1975), 76.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Holliday and Potts, 2.

of kitsch is an “unmistakable sign of modernization.”⁵ But it is not simply that the phenomenon of kitsch represents the inauguration of modernity. To Brock’s dismay, kitsch is arguably the texture of twenty-first century living.

To demonstrate the elusive presence of the aesthetic, Holliday and Potts plainly show that it is even more a common tendency “that no one really consumes kitsch as such; in the same way that no one consumes art or popular culture or soap opera. We each, in all of our particularity, watch *Coronation Street* or *Everybody Loves Raymond* or DVD boxsets of *Dynasty* or *Charlie’s Angels*, maybe with a tray on our lap, or under a duvet.”⁶

Without doubt, kitsch taste comprises a large part of popular culture that does not seem as radically evil as Broch puts it. Today, kitsch can be found comprising the design of many if not all holiday decorations, sentimental greeting cards, Zoltan Fortune Teller Slot Machines, as well as in “nature itself (kitsch consumers have the power to turn the world into a postcard).”⁷ Other obvious examples of kitsch they list include “*that vintage glass Murano glass rabbit*,”⁸ “*Aloha Elvis*,”⁹ the national talent show, “*Eurovision*,”¹⁰ to some Christian examples like “a Last Supper lunchbox.”¹¹ In the same line of argumentation, religious scholar Leonard Norman Primiano lists wristbands from the “What Would Jesus Do?” movement, and “*The Life of Pope John Paul II* illustrated in a publication from Marvel Comics.”¹² Another recent example that made its way into the music industry in

⁵ Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 226.

⁶ Holliday and Potts, 241-242.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² Leonard Norman Primiano, “Kitsch,” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. John C. Lyden and Eric Michael Mazur (New York: Routledge, 2015), 282-283.

November, 2015 is the album *Wake Up!* released under the name of Pope Francis I, which features spoken word and a fusion of Gregorian chanting with distorted, crooning guitar riffs and bracketed with bright organs.

Alternatively, there are less noisy Christian examples that have made their way onto store shelves. These include products manufactured by an American tea company inaugurated by former baker Eileen Hadaway. Known now to be called the “Tea Lady,”¹³ Hadaway found inspiration to begin the company in “1982, [when] “God blessed [her]” with an entrepreneurial idea – “Scripture Tea. Each teabag would have a Scripture message on it. Quality of tea and packaging were of the essence. Testimonies and thank-you letters were pouring in from all over the world.”¹⁴ The juxtaposition of biblical Scripture and herbal caffeine-free tea in a variety of flavours, on the one hand, surely involves a solemn yet comforting sensation for consumers. For others, *Scripture Tea* may instead impart an ironically unfaithful and culturally vulgar amalgamation of biblical text and teabag. Whether ironic or sincere, Christian kitsch in one way symbolizes a modern evangelical translation of Christian values that has been disturbed by rapid developments in consumerism and popular culture.

To defend against the charge of cultural *savagery*, advertising campaigns offer these kitsch objects ironically, which is then reflected at a face to face level in endorsements by friends, or pastors, to assist in the manufacturing of cool culture and cool church. One is reminded here of the recent Christian ‘hipster’ movement as explored by author Brent McCracken. His 2010 swashbuckling study, entitled *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide*, documents the peculiar religious preferences identifiable among the generation of Christians more commonly and contentiously known as the millennial generation, who, for those who recognize this phenomenon, are blatantly against the aesthetic emanating from Christian material culture. According to McCracken, Christian

¹³ “About us,” Scripture Tea Products, Inc., <http://www.scripturetea.com/about-us.aspx>

¹⁴ Ibid.

hipsters would much rather consider that “[a] photograph of a candy wrapper might be just as holy as a sculpted crucifix,”¹⁵ but only if that candy wrapper can be recycled and appropriated in religious discourse in provocative ways that stand in contradiction to the aesthetic preferences of the millennials’ baby-boomer parents.

1.2 Kitsch in Christian Media

The generational opposition lingers in a silent frustration around the consumption and promotion of a particular strain of Christian thought, art, and practice that, at least for Christian hipsters, would undeniably be considered kitsch. Whether it is in those boxes of *Scripture Tea* or in the didacticism of teen Christian devotionals such as Lorraine Peterson’s *Anyone Can Be Cool...But Awesome Takes Practice* or *If God Loves Me, Why Can’t I Get My Locker Open?*, Christian kitsch involves problems deeper than merely its desperate attempt to appeal to all tastes. To use the words of German Catholic author Karl Pawek (1906-1983), “[w]hat is unique about Christian kitsch is that there is more to it than a purely stylistic deficiency. A kitsch flower-vase does display a stylistic deficiency, but a kitsch statue of the Sacred Heart displays a theological deficiency.”¹⁶ Part of the problem, then, lies in the way kitsch works to cultivate a pattern of religious sensibility and thought that, for much of the younger generation, is altogether embarrassing because it appears to lack theological depth.

A glimpse of this pattern, as McCracken points out, can partially be seen in the active cooptation of secular culture in the recent entrepreneurial eagerness emerging from evangelical movements:

Part of the new “rethink everything!” disposition of evangelicalism in the eighties and nineties was an aggressively commercialistic development of an evangelical subculture. A mind-set of “whatever the secular culture can do, we can do too—only Christianly!” arose. As a result, we

¹⁵ Brett McCracken, *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 168.

¹⁶ Karl Pawek, “Christian Kitsch,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles, (New York: Universe Books, 1975), 145.

saw the birth of Christian retail chains and everything from Christian sci-fi novels to Christian computer games, Christian animated cartoon series (including McGee and Me and Veggie Tales) and Christian T-shirts (that often mimicked current popular T-shirt brands, such as No Fear). If the secular market produced anything remotely cool, trendy, or popular, you'd be sure to find a Christian version in no time.¹⁷

Despite the tremendous resentment towards this movement of contemporary Christian culture, the enthusiasm emanating from evangelical entrepreneurialism continues to reverberate through subsets of media and Church youth groups. It is encountered not only in the form of the tea, children's television series, or devotional novels already mentioned. Prevalent evidences of the evangelical cooptation today include compilations of contemporary worship music, like the *WoW* instalments managed by Capitol Christian Music Group, or the selling of graphic T-shirts based off of recently released video games such as *Call of Duty*.¹⁸ In the latter case, these T-shirts have the text of 2 Cor 10:4 emblazoned on the chest: "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds" (NKJV), with "weapons" and "warfare" in bright, neon green text. Underneath the passage is the phrase, "CALLED TO DUTY," complete with a kneeling soldier in the background, outlined in a cloud of grey smoke with a large and yellow illuminated cross behind and to the right side of the graphic. Conflating the biblical text and the game's outrageously violent and controversial content not only illustrates the attempt to appeal to or proselytize subsets of

¹⁷ McCracken, 85.

¹⁸ To see a picture of the shirt, please visit <http://promisekeepers.org/shop/weapons-of-our-warfare-christian-t-shirts.html>

(male) youth culture, but to do so at seemingly any theological cost.¹⁹ Similar cases could be cited for comparison, like the *Guitar Hero* video game clone, *Guitar Praise 3*.²⁰

Efforts to Christianize these and other forms of secular media and fashion have been criticized by reputable video game magazines such as *Polygon*, perhaps for reasons relating to the promotion of evangelical Christian values and sentiments, but also for reasons of taste. At one level, the price to pay for this form of advocacy has entailed a censorship of the rise in brutal violence and lyrically offensive content commonly found in other forms of media, and this is without doubt a commendable task so far as it goes. *Polygon* columnist, Patrick Stafford, however, remarks that distinctly Christian media directed towards acquiring the undivided and malleable attention of adolescents, who would otherwise be interested in mature content, has attained the reputation of falsely depicting real life circumstances so as to engender a specific and supposedly Christian demeanour. In the case of video game design intended to instill evangelical virtue in consumers, popular Christian media is criticized for releasing material with “a lack of quality.”²¹ “But the worst offence isn’t that these games are [technically] bad,” he continues to point out. “Their worst crime is that they shun complex thought at a time when games are exploring more complicated issues than they have ever before. Deep, meaningful and affecting issues—like cancer.”²² By extension, media that would be particularly low in quality should not be on account of the limitations in software,

¹⁹ One is reminded of the recent controversy surrounding the “No Russian” level in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, in which players must “decide whether or not to join in the killing of unarmed civilians.” For the press, see Paul Revoir, “Storm over Call of Duty game that allows players to massacre civilians,” *DailyMail*, November 11, 2009 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1226588/Call-Duty-Political-storm-brutal-video-game-allows-killing-civilians-airport-massacre.html#ixzz46XF1B5Xo> (accessed April 22, 2016).

²⁰ Patrick Stafford, “Higher Calling: The New Gospel of Christian Games,” *Polygon*, December 20, 2012, <http://www.polygon.com/features/2012/12/20/3768184/higher-calling-the-new-gospel-of-christian-games> (accessed April 21, 2016).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

miscalculated programming, or the technical difficulties developers regularly encounter. This definition of quality is increasingly discarded as techniques in mass-production are increasingly refined and therefore do not require investigation of their assembly. Instead, our collective obsessions with quality are now indicative of many magazines that rate and review various forms of media, which garner attention by the ways in which content is presented and censored that would reflect ways of critically engaging with real world scenarios, both failures and successes.

One might say that in this case, truth claims are intimately connected with the concept of quality. Within the nature of quality is found a demonstration of how content can provoke, challenge, and address perspectives and attitudes that would otherwise be avoided. The problem is that some contemporary forms of media that are didactically Christian, like *Guitar Praise 3* or *Called to Duty*, lose this qualitative viewpoint by blindly forcing a narrow range of biblical content on consumers, who are thereby not provoked or challenged, but rather “edified.” As a result, “Christian” media gains the reputation of seeking to evade the often convoluted and sometimes threatening confrontations that must surely arise within most and perhaps all contemporary styles of living.

The problem that these newer generations of Christians then face is one of integrity—paradoxically, the very thing that a product like *Guitar Praise 3* is intended to secure. Emerging questions slowly gravitate towards reconciling the gap between the harsh, realities many people encounter on a daily basis and the influence of the comforting perspectives that evangelical kitsch entertainment fosters. Unfortunately, these forms of Christian media in mainstream culture are, in many cases, difficult to critique because of the appeal to the kitsch aesthetic and its inexorable link with religion and taste.

1.3 Concerning the approach to *taste*

One resource that might help disconnect the link between taste and the problems inherent in religious kitsch is *The Rebel Sell*, by cultural critics Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter. “Ever notice that the masses have incredibly bad taste? Admit it. Take a look at a

painting by Thomas Kinkade ('Painter of Light').... His work is so awful, it must be seen to be believed."²³ While this straight to calendar painter once held the title of "the best-selling visual artist in the United States,"²⁴ Kinkade's (1958-2012) 'Faith' paintings, quite ironically, have become the face of what Christian art, for many of its young hipster and counter-cultural believers, is decidedly not. "Why? Because his paintings are just so saccharine and idyllic, they say. The cottages and waterfalls and lush flower gardens as rendered by the so-called painter of light do not advance any sort of truthful or artistically credible vision of the world. His paintings are just so happy and naïve and fake."²⁵ His artistic brand is also ceaselessly under fire by many relentless religious bloggers and unforgiving writers of cultural theory. For blogger Simcha Fischer, who writes for the *National Catholic Register*, Kinkade's work is "anti-Incarnational,"²⁶ and, for columnist Terry Mattingly, wildly "heretical."²⁷ Exhibiting bad taste in the Christian arts is not something to be dismissed so easily. It is only the beginning of a complex theological problem.

These examples and the reactions they incite reflect the present agenda of this thesis that, at its core, seeks to capture kitsch within the larger Christian aesthetic and inspect how it is influencing the direction of modern theological opinion and comprehension. The second chapter of this thesis intends to guide the reader through a brief history of the term to track the troubled reputation it has developed over time in Western culture. Since its involvement with Christianity, kitsch has developed a unique relationship with Christian

²³ Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2004), 123.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁵ McCracken, 162.

²⁶ Simcha Fisher, "What's So Bad About Thomas Kinkade?" *National Catholic Register: America's most complete Catholic News Source*, August 25, 2011, <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/simcha-fisher/whats-so-bad-about-thomas-kinkade> (accessed December 2, 2015).

²⁷ Mattingly, Terry. "The heretical art of Thomas Kinkade," *Patheos: Hosting the Conversation on Faith*, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tmatt/2012/07/the-heretical-art-of-thomas-kinkade/> (accessed October 23, 2015).

thought and culture that can effectively obscure boundaries of what is considered a provocative source of religious inspiration. In an effort to clarify these aesthetic parameters in religious practice, an investigation of the theological aesthetics of Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) will be undertaken in chapter 3. His monumental seven-volume treatment of theological aesthetics includes a daring reconsideration of the troublesome notion of quality in modern Christian aesthetics, which is an element he argues is especially important to investigate in the composition of modern Christian art and dialogue. The need to critically explore this element in modern theological aesthetics will be explored further in chapter 4, by way of Slavoj Žižek's experimental interpretations of theology. Incorporating Žižek's critique into a post-modern theological aesthetics, I contend, is advantageous to the approach to newer forms of religious thought that seeks to rehabilitate a fresh understanding of quality into future Christian devotional practice.

As kitsch is a deeply entrenched phenomenon in Western civilization, it is important to note that addressing all of its theoretical nuances is not possible within the limits of this thesis. Before turning to chapter 2, therefore, it should be observed that this thesis assumes that kitsch is a slippery and somewhat indefinite phenomenon because of its dependence on the concept of taste. The thesis refrains from developing a concise theory of taste and instead focuses on kitsch as a particular theological dilemma, leaving aside its broader philosophical and anthropological criticisms. Lastly, while taste is associated in the argument with the development of the Christian witness, the thesis does not seek to make authoritative claims about what is considered beautiful. On the contrary, it seeks to promote the study of beauty and aesthetics as an important factor in theological education, and as a theme of theological scholarship.

Chapter 2

2 Heritage and Methodology

Rightly anticipating any analysis of kitsch are brief yet selective genealogies of its inception in modernity. Most linguistic tracing proposes that some definitions of kitsch are heavily dependent on the era and culture in which it manifests, which certainly presents limitations on respective literature reviews. While the literature is sometimes contesting, the wide range of theories across many alternative contexts nonetheless is able to contribute to the semantics of the phenomenon and its implications, as well as provide awareness for future study. Selected in this chapter are theories from diverse fields that are able to support a methodology of examining kitsch as it manifests as a particular theological phenomenon.

2.1 Deciphering the Esperanto of “bad taste”

Indeed, the very presence of *kitsch* in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* already predicts its complexity. Its German origins have been concealed by numerous translations into French such as *art de pacotille* (junk art) or *art tape-a-l’oeil* (garnish art).²⁸ In his definitive book, *Five Faces of Modernity*, Matei Călinescu nods to further French comparisons such as *style pompier*, “a pompous, academizing variety of bad taste,” and *camelote*, “the cheapness and poor quality of many kitsch objects.”²⁹ Each expression comes close to reflecting the essence of kitsch, he claims, but only partially.³⁰ In more familiar terms, he cites descriptors like “*schlock* (stuff of low quality or value) or *schmaltz* (sentimental and exaggerated florid art).”³¹ They are closer cousins in semantic

²⁸ *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin. English translation ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 538.

²⁹ Călinescu, 234.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

meaning, but in his opinion the most playful comparison “is the Russian term *poshlust*, at least in its Nabokovian interpretation and transcription, in which ‘the first ‘o’ is as big as the plop of an elephant falling into a muddy pond and as round as the bosom of a bathing beauty in a German picture postcard’.”³² Having parallels across a few different languages, and a hypothesis that kitsch is *chic* spelled backwards, kitsch collects an unusual assortment of sensations and attitudes that testifies to its versatility, and therefore its elusiveness, in Western consumer culture.³³

A more plausible theory of its inception, Călinescu proposes, is that it is linked to a mispronunciation of *sketch* in “the 1860s and 1870s in the jargon of painters and art dealers in Munich, and was employed to designate cheap artistic stuff.”³⁴ Kitsch examined through this perspective did not at first concern matters of taste but instead pointed to “those cheap images bought as souvenirs by tourists, especially the Anglo-Americans.”³⁵ Agreeing with this derivation, the author of *Ugly: The Aesthetics of Everything*, Art Historian Stephen Bayley similarly poses the idea that *kitsch* “might be onomatopoeia for the sound of a Kodak shutter, a remembrance of a tourist capturing a sight for later vicarious enjoyment. More certain is that the word *verkitschen* means to knock something off. To make a facsimile.”³⁶ The classic *snap* of the Kodak perhaps captures the enthusiasm of the disposable camera, but was only at first introduced in the United States in 1888.³⁷ The intensive German verb *verkitschen*, which he suggests, implies that kitsch, like photography, leans more towards a process rather than the actual

³² Ibid., 233.

³³ Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 19.

³⁴ Calinescu, 234.

³⁵ Ibid., 234.

³⁶ Stephen Bayley, *Ugly: The Aesthetics of Everything* (London: Goodman Field, 2012), 141.

³⁷ “Heritage,” Kodak, <http://www.kodak.com/ek/US/en/corp/aboutus/heritage/default.htm>

product that may better allude to the enthusiastic setting of late nineteenth-century industrialism and tourism.

Pioneered from the ‘daguerreotype’ after its French inventor Louis Daguerre (1787-1851), the photograph had indeed been proof that the camera could mechanically reproduce highly detailed images faster and more precise than the artist’s hand. Its mobility relative to the canvas also boasted the capturing of previously unreachable and unfathomable perspectives that could rival the most renowned imaginations of the time. What may have been considered artistic jargon would now be fit to distinguish art from those inexplicably wondrous vignettes on storefront carousels to suit the time-constrained demands of awe-struck Americans during leisurely travel.

As the voyeuristic trend of ‘capturing’ increased alongside technological improvements of the camera, the peculiar work of cultural historian Celeste Olalquiaga suggests how this gradual change “not only altered the proliferation and affordability of images, but also enabled a particular, modern sensibility based on the pre-eminence of looking and collecting...Scientific research and industrialization were beginning to reconstruct the world anew, burgeoning with the possibilities of taming and artificially reproducing nature.”³⁸ Curiosity about the exotic and the unfamiliar helped people to cope with the increase of mechanical inventions that seemed to threaten pre-Industrial ways of living by interacting with art and objects in a different manner. The trend of capturing that sense of life whether through photograph, statuettes, fossilized paperweights, ferns, or by installing basement aquariums had been the attempt to comfort consumers with “emotional intensity in the face of technological dehumanization.”³⁹ Each of these examples, or souvenirs, were tokens of vicarious memory, or in Olalquiaga’s words,

³⁸ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 13.

³⁹ Primiano, 295.

“dream images”⁴⁰ through which consumers could gaze wondrously into pre-Industrialist ways of living, not necessarily familiar to them.

2.2 *L’art du Bonheur*

The marketplace took advantage of this situation by advertising and further selling these exotic ornamental products and goods that then fulfilled the consumerist desire to vicariously experience another worldview that might yet have not been subjected to the automated processes of burgeoning Industrialist technologies. Whether through importing or reproduction, the styles associated with foreign art, animal skins, and mounted antlers, became higher in demand. As the machines that produced and shipped them were multiplying, French philosopher Abraham Moles (1920-1992) notes how this strange mania had been exacerbated by:

the growth of the department store, the first of which opened in Paris in 1826. What happened...is that during the nineteenth century the need for precious boxes and Chinese porcelain that the upper classes had long acknowledged slowly seeped down to the lower-middle classes who aspired to cheaper versions of the same thing. These cheaper versions were both mass produced, but also represented a levelling down of taste.⁴¹

Profitable for rising entrepreneurs and producers and increasingly cheaper for middle-class consumers, these artifacts “[diluted] the originality of great art so that it became acceptable to everyone.”⁴² Possessing and displaying an elephant’s foot footstool without traveling to Africa, or mounting a Mexican folk art rug on a living room wall, or placing Egyptian art on a fireplace mantel, was not an entirely obscene practice. These objects were welcomed because they generated curiosity and conversation, and collecting a wide variety of these relics without travel contributed to the development of personal

⁴⁰ Olalquiaga, 24.

⁴¹ Timothy Gorringer, “Kitsch and the Task of Theology,” *Theology Today* 56, no. 2 (07/01, 1999): 230, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000994720&site=ehost-live>.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 230.

taste and flair, which would cultivate a unique style and further hint at belonging to high-class culture. Finding its way into the homes of lower to middle class cultures, these decorative objects would eventually adopt the name “*l’art du Bonheur*, art without dissonance or contradictions.”⁴³

While the industrial atmosphere had been one of abundance, the larger ethos was tinged with high levels of uncertainty that ensued from the rather instantaneous and concealed production of noble art and luxurious goods. This was partly due to the rise of giant corporations and automated factories, which, as Călinescu notes, facilitated the “mass diffusion of art through the diverse media: radio, TV, large-scale reproduction, records, cheap magazines and paperbacks sold in supermarkets.”⁴⁴ Under these intimidating and impersonal circumstances, Bayley suggests, *l’art du Bonheur*:

had a weird character that was neither fake nor authentic. Not true fakes because a biscuit tin stamped with a gothic moulding was not really pretending to be anything other than what it was.... Not really authentic because the concept of authenticity depends on notions of morality and honesty which were absent where the mass production of decorated tins was concerned.⁴⁵

The nomadic characteristic of these goods was rather puzzling for the lower-class consumer. Through the cold and isolating processes involved with mass production, the authentic relation exuding from reproduced art became dislocated from the source of its creator. This eventually, as Olalquiaga observes, brought with it a general feeling of alienation, a dislocating perspective brought on by the littering presence of mass-produced objects, in which she discerns the shattering and dispersal of the “aura” of authenticity.⁴⁶ “Somewhat depressingly,” in Bailey’s perspective, “this led to generalized

⁴³ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁴ Călinescu, 255.

⁴⁵ Bayley, 128.

⁴⁶ Olalquiaga, 18. Olalquiaga’s use of the term “aura” is a direct reference to Walter Benjamin’s (1892-1940) famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), in which he introduces the concept to characterize our changing experiences with nature and history alongside

mediocracy rather than generalized excellence.”⁴⁷ In order to compensate for the failed attempt at expanding prestige and extending the tradition to middle-class consumers, new perspectives of mass-produced art and imported goods were needed. In the words of Kristina C. Marcellus, “[m]echanical reproduction broke the bond that had existed until the nineteenth century between uniqueness and authenticity. A new definition of uniqueness thus arose, one where experience and interaction replaced authenticity.”⁴⁸ Search for new value in many new art forms and luxury items entailed the emergence of a new way of interacting with them. Kitsch, according to Olalquiaga’s study in *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience*, begins with realizing this separation of perspective and continues with the lamenting impulse of seeking to repossess a type of interaction with objects and art before the advent of the shopping mall. This trend, she claims, is especially notable through the acquisition of items such as collectible and ornamental glass as well as petrified souvenirs.

2.3 Authenticity and Uniqueness

Along with the rise of cafés in France merging with the advent of the market-arcade and the craze of “Egyptomania,”⁴⁹ Olalquiaga maintains, the abundance of *l’art du Bonheur* “attracted clients with spectacles such as ‘monsters, giants, strange animals, poets, clowns and acrobats,’ creating an exotic atmosphere which, dense with filtered light and

industrialism. Under section II, he contends that the aura “withers” in mechanical reproduction by bringing these experiences closer to us, whether through film, photograph, or, in Olalquiaga’s observations, the souvenir. Benjamin does not necessarily consider this to be entirely negative as it at first introduces new ways of interacting with nature and history. New value, he contends, is found in “exhibitionism.” On the other hand, Olalquiaga interprets the complete disappearance of the “aura” to indicate the beginning of kitsch, which then functions as the desire to repossess the aura of history and nature that mechanical reproduction “shattered”. While Benjamin’s work is influential to much of modern aesthetic theory, a detailed analysis of the “aura” does not fit within the scope of this thesis, but anticipates further study. See Clive Cazeaux’s inclusion and treatment of Benjamin’s work in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, second edition, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2011), 429-450.

⁴⁷ Bayley, 128.

⁴⁸ Kristina C. Marcellus, “Cultural Junk Shop,” *The Semiotic Review of Books* 14, no. 3 (2004): 8, <http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/semiotics/vol%2014.3.pdf>

⁴⁹ Holliday and Potts, 18.

pipe smoke, made the delight of the flaneur, that ‘ocular gastronomer’ always ‘insatiable for cheap emotions’.”⁵⁰ The constant, abundant thrill of these things began to cultivate the new sensation of uniqueness, which indicates the ownership of a variety of unfamiliar yet undeniably exquisite products. These were united with the assistance of none other than what she considers as “one of the most symptomatic of modern mores: coffee drinking.”⁵¹ This consumerist eccentricity, exacerbated by the novelty item, can be explained by the obsessive search, mourning, and longing for the loss of *authenticity*. It is a rare quality especially reserved to indicate pre-Industrialist ways of interacting with nature and art forms that precede the traumatic perspective brought on by nineteenth-century ideology.

While consumerist culture continues to grow and the appearance of mass-produced goods and imitation nature increases, Olalquiaga notes that the authentic perspective increasingly recedes. As a result, the appeal to recover and, more importantly, preserve the vision is amplified. This process begins with the turn to uniqueness, the sincere belief that any one of these items “can always be rescued from its apparent banality by the investment in it of personal meaning, that ineffable ‘sentimental value’ which can beat the most priceless items.”⁵² By using her fossilized hermit crab Rodney (who is confined in glass) as an analogy, however, Olalquiaga relates that kitsch does not preserve authenticity inasmuch as it crystallizes its loss. It might be said from her observations that kitsch sensibility memorializes the separation of uniqueness and authenticity. Thus, kitsch for Olalquiaga becomes a confused and disappointing token of remembrance between life and death, “moving between an irretrievable past and a fragmented present, at home only in the certainty of its own impossibility.”⁵³ With this interpretation, she

⁵⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁵¹ Ibid., 22.

⁵² Ibid., 17.

⁵³ Ibid., 68.

declares that kitsch is “a failed commodity that continually speaks of all it has ceased to be—a virtual image, existing in the impossibility of full being.”⁵⁴ This failure, it might be said, is the active and inadequate labelling of uniqueness onto authenticity rather than the seamless recovery of their bond. Kitsch covets authenticity, the result of which is sentimental value. But before sentimentality is a chastised concept, Olalquiaga shows how, as a product of modernity, it is essentially a prophetic emotion that encourages immediate consolation.

Olalquiaga’s haunting interpretations of kitsch, particularly in the intersection of the dying organic and the technical, invite further examination in another project. Studying kitsch in this light might, for instance, enable us to comment on how this cultural practice begins to point towards complex psychological and religious themes. In short, kitsch signifies a cultural shift and indicates a strong desire to return to a period of time before department store colonization and before the advent of the voyeuristic procedures learned from the *camera obscura*. Her methodology exploring the kitsch aesthetic in terms of the distortion of uniqueness and authenticity now points to another facet of kitsch sensibility, one identified in the work of Italian aesthetician, Gillo Dorfles (b. 1910).

2.4 Incongruous Transpositions

Olalquiaga’s influential interpretation of the relationship between authenticity and uniqueness can in one way be further developed on the basis of Dorfles’ seminal collection of essays on kitsch and beauty. Sharing a similar opinion to Olalquiaga, he acknowledges that these objects “only apparently encourage culture and taste: what they really do is to incite the public to put the authentic masterpiece on the same level as the mediocre or even obscene copy.”⁵⁵ In some cases, artful objects are tampered with in order to visually improve or perhaps overcompensate for the lack of quality perhaps due

⁵⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁵ Gillo Dorfles, “Kitsch,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Universe Books, 1975), 32.

to the inaccuracy and unfamiliarity of copying machines. Further embellishment of the object itself, which most certainly includes alterations to medium and context, creates an illusion to “make the public feel that they are more attractive, more beautiful and more effective than the originals.”⁵⁶ Often in these conspicuous processes he calls “styling,”⁵⁷ which could even serve the purpose of having catalogue advertising appear more attractive, the authenticity of the representation of the original art “lost all respect for faithfulness to scale and nuances of colour, for the overall feeling of the image.”⁵⁸ This distortion, however, as a side-effect, dramatically damages the reputation of the original art itself.

To cite an example, he shows how Auguste Rodin’s (1840-1917) statue *Le Penseur* had been featured in department store catalogues as a highly detailed model available for purchase at a discounted price.⁵⁹ As a decorative model requiring assembly, *The Thinker* was adapted from its original location “to add a touch of grace to tables, shelves, desks or mantelpieces.... No special talent or knowledge is required.”⁶⁰ This is a process Dorfles calls “transposition,” the movement of “a work of art from its own particular and characteristic language into another which is not suited to it. Almost without exception this produces something in bad taste unless the transposition is made by a particularly gifted artist capable of creating not just a ‘translation’ of the original work, but a new work which has only very tenuous connections with the original.”⁶¹ The offence does not necessarily lie in the commodification of the item, nor does it necessarily mean an

⁵⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁹ Gillo Dorfles, “Transpositions,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Universe Books, 1975), 86.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁶¹ Ibid., 87.

infidelity to detail. To employ Olalquiaga's terminology, it has rather much more to do with the uniqueness of repurposing the authentic essence of the work that is visually or semantically incoherent in another context.

A main variable of the phenomenon lies not within the blatant disrespect for genuine art but rather in the lack of or disregard for training in aesthetic theory. "Evidently the bad taste which predominates in our age," he admits,

has acted in such a way that many famous works come to be identified with their anecdotal or extrinsic aspects, and modern man is often unable to appreciate fully the relationship between 'form' and 'content' in a work. As a result these are split up, either because attention is focused exclusively on 'form', as is illustrated by the exact replicas of masterpieces of figurative art which fail to take into account the substance of the original or its constituent materials, or because too much attention is paid to the 'content'.⁶²

In other words, kitsch represents an *incongruous* transposition that refers to an imbalance of form and content within a particular work of art. As previously noted, the problem that contributes to the appearance of kitsch is not so much in the ownership of the trinket itself. It is instead in a process of how the subject misreads the balance of 'form' and 'content' as a representation of the wholeness of the art. Kitsch, it could be said in this case, is not solely the mistreatment of these two qualities but instead begins as the mistaking of the imbalance of form and content as an equilibrium. The perceived equilibrium may be called authentic, genuine, or, in some modern religious cases, holy. In any case, Dorfles theory of transposition compliments Olalquiaga's division of authenticity and uniqueness, and both begin to build a relevant methodology. Their approach can address a subset of kitsch that has influenced the quality of modern Christian art and the mislabelling of its perceived religious experience.

Resulting from many of these and other examples of incongruous transpositions, Dorfles observes, are modern scenarios, particularly in early cinematic productions, that "give

⁶² Ibid., 87.

rise to ‘sentimentalization’, ‘eroticization’ or ‘historicization’.’⁶³ Any art or product that suffers from these transpositions elements are then “burdened with new sentimental or anti-historical or romantic etc. connotations which the original did not contain.”⁶⁴ Boxes of caffeine-free *Scripture Tea* can, in one way, reflect the uniqueness of an incongruous transposition of biblical text onto teabags. While the choice to use the mood that is commonly associated with tea to convey the mood of the Gospel may be (on the most generous of interpretations) reflective of a sincere gesture towards mission, it is at the same time a product guilty of amalgamating essences that are conceptually and stylistically unrelated. Fused together still by the theological opinion of its producers and distributors, *Scripture Tea* arouses a mood that is inauthentic to the intensity of Scripture but is sold as if it were theologically provoking and furthermore complementary to it. If the form in which the content of scripture is presented is not authentic to its message and theme, the incongruous transposition that results can also be shown to have impact on the question of theological substance. The most prominent of nineteenth-century Catholic “styling” that compromises this question, for example, can be further traced to the history of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, France.

2.4.1 *L’art Saint-Sulpice*

According to religious historian Colleen McDannell, the church of Saint-Sulpice had its liturgical art mass-produced and imported from French, German, and American factories under the discretion of Church authorities.⁶⁵ Statues of Mary, Jesus, and the saints began to be shaped from white plaster, which was “cheaper and more attractive than the traditional statues made of wood or marble.”⁶⁶ While more fragile than the traditional

⁶³ Gillo Dorfles, “‘The Betrothed’ and Co.,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles, (New York: Universe Books, 1975), 92.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁵ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 168.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

materials, manufacturing liturgical objects using plaster offered an advantage to the Church because of its abundance and ease of preparation. The increase in production of white statuettes and crucifixes quickly became a profitable source of income for the Church, who took extra devotional items to the Left Bank markets in Paris and sold them with the intent that the public would use them for private practices and decorative purposes.

When the demand for these objects increased worldwide, conversations between the factories and the Church resulted in the incentive to increase the appeal or, perhaps, the “effectiveness” of the plaster figurines. Since, owing to the proliferation of these statues, they were increasingly perceived as being “cold and lifeless”⁶⁷ by laypeople and clergy, the Church eventually agreed to allow the white plaster to be painted by local artisanal shops because “realistically colored statues were thought to bring sacred figures to life.”⁶⁸ To protect against any unforeseen heretical implications, “French producers encouraged the clergy to equate their painted statues with medieval polychrome statuary.”⁶⁹ Stylizing crucifixes and the array of saints, in one way, consoled clergy and laypeople experiencing Christianity through Industrialism. The strategy was also a strategic maneuver on the part of producers to keep in business, as factory officials urged the Church and the congregation to “not deride their mass-produced art but rather [to see it] as modern and technologically sophisticated.”⁷⁰ After impressing the Church with such a “state-of-the-art” perspective, the result was that, by the middle of the nineteenth-century, a deluge of religious goods and objects infiltrated the marketplace. “In 1862,” McDannell states, “Paris had at least a hundred and twenty-one firms that made and marketed the material culture of Catholicism: holy water fonts, medals, statues,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 169.

crucifixes, rosaries, holy cards, *ex votos*, religious jewelry, candles, scapulars, crêches, wax *Agnus Dei*, lace pictures, and novena cards.”⁷¹ These objects were linked together with a distinguishing signature that eventually acquired the name, *l’art Saint-Sulpice*.

Naturally, some questioned the appearance of these devotional objects, and eventually the name and the style associated with it developed a rather adverse reputation. *L’art Saint-Sulpice* “became a derogatory term for books and objects that were cheap, vulgar, and pretentiously pious.”⁷² McDannell seems to propose that much of this criticism emerges from the way *l’art Saint-Sulpice* represented the idea of “sacredness.” “Unlike the realistic statues of the baroque period,” she states, “*l’art Saint-Sulpice* avoided the bloody and pained images of Christ and the martyrs. There was almost no decay or decomposition in *l’art Saint-Sulpice*.”⁷³ In place of contemplating the transfiguring passion of Jesus Christ and the saints, French Catholic art instead filtered representations of Christian sacredness through the “sweet and sentimental, attributes traditionally associated with femininity.”⁷⁴ Seen in this way, the advent of *l’art Saint-Sulpice* altered and established a new way of transmitting the idea of sacredness through the exploitation of modern and particularly domestic, feminine stereotypes. Recognizing this pattern, in McDannell’s opinion, can be a sign of immanent religious kitsch.

The importance of including McDannell’s research in this chapter lies in the identification of a particular (masculine) component lacking in the direction of modern Catholic kitsch, which can be mirrored by Protestant depictions of the ideal of sacredness. As the Protestant kitsch is briefly analyzed by McDannell to lack its (feminine) counterpart, these examples together can nonetheless adequately point to

⁷¹ Ibid., 168.

⁷² Ibid., 169.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 174.

Dorfles' methodology, in which the composition of modern religious art is compromised by an imbalance of form and content through incongruous transpositions.

2.5 Discerning "Ultimate Reality"

Occurrences of this type of Christian kitsch as an imbalance of form and content tend to refer to what German American theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) considers a rather vandalizing message. In its worst extremes, such kitsch might even be thought a manifestation of evil within material religion as development of damaged Christian relations that compromise the Christian community and its experience with God. Its influence on the composition of Christian art demonstrates a weakness that, according to English philosopher, Roger Scruton, "reflects...spiritual waywardness, and...failure, not merely to *value* the human spirit, but to perform those sacrificial acts which *create* it."⁷⁵ As such, the potential of kitsch appearing in the religious value system with which theology currently deals is evidence, not of the reconciliation of humanity with God, but of the contrary.

For Tillich, who took an interest in the philosophy of Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), Christian kitsch symbolizes the "estrangement of the actual human situation from the essential unity of the human with the divine, the reality of the cross which critical realism shows in its whole empirical beauty, and which expressionism shows in its paradoxical significance."⁷⁶ By turning away both from the centrality and profundity of the cross, kitsch, in terms of the Christian religion, effectively encourages Christians to turn away from God.

Following Tillich, I will argue that this avoidance of the cross is the central problem to understanding the paradox of Christian kitsch in modern culture. Tillich's formula of

⁷⁵ Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2000), 91.

⁷⁶ Paul Tillich, "Art and ultimate reality," *Cross Currents* 10, no. 1 (1960): 11, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=ATLA0001443712&site=ehost-live>.

Christian kitsch conveys an imbalance of ‘critical realism’ and ‘expressionism,’ which I contend are synonymous with Dorfles’ notions of form and content, respectively.

Christian kitsch occurs, according to Tillich, not precisely when these notions are out of balance but when the imbalance is mistaken for a pronouncement of true Christian beauty in remembrance of the paradox of the cross. In other words, what may appear to be sincere instances of Christian art are instead representations of evil through sentimental and tasteless replicas.

Appearing just under a decade before Dorfles’ anthology, Tillich’s valuable interpretation was developed in a seminar held on February 17th, 1959 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. In the seminar, he refers to the notion of art and its capacity to reflect an “ultimate reality, a subject which, although including religion, transcends by far what is usually called religious. Ultimate reality underlies every reality, and it characterizes the whole appearing world as non-ultimate, preliminary, transitory and finite.”⁷⁷ This is a suggestion that the qualitative function particular to all true art ought to encounter and restore this perspective. It involves a vision of the universe that is not at first Christian but is nonetheless decidedly religious, which pertains to a vision that Tillich seems to characterize as “authentic.” Any art that is emphatically religious is a view of ‘ultimate reality,’ which, in Joseph Price’s words, “must reveal the deep structures of being.”⁷⁸ Delineating this revelatory vision, however, depends on identifying impediments that prevent it from appearing this way. Addressing these boundaries requires an investigation of aesthetics, and here Tillich proposes that we need to be aware of the handling of two concepts pertaining to aesthetics that are liable to render any art, especially Christian art, kitsch.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁷⁸ Price, Joseph L., “EXPRESSIONISM AND ULTIMATE REALITY: Paul Tillich's Theology of Art,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 69, no. 4 (1968): 481, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/stable/41178394>.

First, Tillich refers to a problem with attention to “critical realism.”⁷⁹ While refraining from providing examples, he claims that artists who decide to paint religious themes “can show everything concretely religious in its concreteness, but only if united with other elements can they show it as religious. Otherwise, they secularize it and, for example, make out of Jesus a village teacher or a revolutionary fanatic or a political victim, often borrowing sentimental traits and beautifying dishonesty from the distortions of the idealistic style.”⁸⁰ While these artists in question are talented at rendering nature and grounding religious narratives with incredible precision and attention to form, he proposes that such art lacks a deep-seated vision of reality that a realistic copy of nature is unable to portray. A reading of kitsch, it could be suggested, is the result of unique and incongruous attempts to translate the content of Christian elements into the form of the art itself.

The second, and the most devastating aspect in the account of kitsch he develops, happens in a process whereby the artist is “confusing idealism with a superficially and sentimentally beautifying realism. This has happened on a large scale, especially in the realm of religious art, and is the reason for the disrepute into which idealism, both word and concept, has fallen....Beautifying realism shows the actual existence of its object, but with dishonest, idealizing additions.”⁸¹ In this particular case, the art is religious insofar as this tendency shows an ideal of the religious object represented. But Tillich explains that this ideal is reduced in kitsch to a sentimental response upon embellishment of the content. To otherwise use an example cited by Graham Ward, “it is the Church that first fostered the ethos of kitsch and hence, even today, it is the gory presentation of the sacred heart, the Lourdes water in plastic bottles with blue celluloid caps of the Virgin, and the fat yellow candles burning before the plaster saints which most clearly typify the celebration of the superficial. Kitsch draws close to bathos. The most profound is

⁷⁹ Tillich, 11.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁸¹ Ibid., 8.

suddenly conceived as expensive vulgarity.”⁸² Ward’s reflections symbolize one root of bad taste, and as such may be explained by unnecessary and superfluous embellishment of religious content over the attention to form. Worse, for Tillich, is when these examples begin to define ‘ultimate reality’ in their popular consumption.

In the attempt to show how art can unveil his concept of an ‘ultimate reality,’ the delineation that Tillich proposes briefly shows that there are particular habits that inform the composition of Christian art as a symbol of praise and devotion. In one tendency, it is the valuation of form over content; in the other, it is the aggrandizement of content over form. In any of these cases, there is a tendency to mistake the sheer imbalance as true source of religious expression that, in its uniqueness, is not capable of genuinely portraying authenticity.

2.6 Concerning *style*

It is not possible, however, to claim a complete balancing of form and content, or critical realism and expressionism. The wide variety religious art testifies to different scales that are, to be sure, imbalanced. These nuances, Tillich concedes, contribute to what is known as “style.”⁸³ Price refers to Tillich’s treatment of ‘style’ as “the manner of representation of particular form-content. As such, style is the element which generates fundamentally religious impressions like disruption (as in ‘Guernica’) and harmony (as in Raphael’s ‘Madonna and Child’), and which stimulates the respective consequent feelings of alienation and peacefulness.”⁸⁴ There are particular feelings that develop from style in Tillich’s vision that are decidedly religious, though not necessarily in a positive sense. Sentimentality may be one of a series of signifiers indicative of a style

⁸² Graham Ward, “In the daylight forever?: language and silence,” in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 167.

⁸³ Price, 484.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 484.

that drastically opposes ‘ultimate reality’. As Holliday and Potts put it, sentimentality as a style “appeals to a latent readiness to cry thoughtless tears...[K]itsch sentiment is ready-made feeling, and ready-made feeling is hardly feeling at all.”⁸⁵ It might be fairer to say, however, that Christian art has a character that results from an amalgamation of styles that include, but are not limited to, sentimentality. The problem is that this style has amassed into an unusual genre and capitalized on a mood that has, on account of this imbalance, infected a large area of modern Christian art.

This chapter has, so far, shown how the sensation of kitsch in one way arose out of a modern sensibility with a need to differentiate between authenticity and uniqueness. It has continued by situating kitsch in relation to incongruous transpositions, the radical imbalance of form and content. Lastly, it has also shown how the mistaking of this imbalance as an equilibrium may be a case of bad taste rather than a true vision of the religious perspective. To demonstrate this offence, the argument now briefly turns to a recent Argentinian art exhibition that seems to seize on the appeal to religious kitsch sensibility.

2.7 *The Plastic Religion*

The recent controversy surrounding the exhibition of *Barbie: The Plastic Religion* in October, 2013, recalls artistic tropes that attempt to garner attention by subjecting traditional Christian themes to heavy criticism. This is a powerful genre that has been championed by Andreas Serrano’s politically charged *Piss Christ* (1987) and is continued in Cosimo Cavallaro’s edible chocolate sculpture of the body of the crucified Jesus entitled, *Sweet Jesus* (2005).⁸⁶ Promoting a similar vision, *The Plastic Religion* features a pantheon of hand-crafted Barbie and Ken dolls dressed in different avatars of religious figures and political heroes. Among them were included many cartoonish renditions of

⁸⁵ Holliday and Potts, 15-16.

⁸⁶ Aaron Rosen, “The holy-book bomb: is this the most offensive artwork ever?” *The Guardian*, October 23, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/23/offensive-art-holy-book-bomb-chocolate-jesus?CMP=tw_t_a-culture_b-gdnculture (accessed October 23, 2015).

the Virgin Mary, alongside Barbie as Joan of Arc, Ken as the Buddha, and Barbie as Kali, the Indian *deva* of time and destruction. While this collection is not as outrageous as submerging a crucifix in a jar of urine, artists Marianela Perelli and Pool Paolini have enraged many Catholics through their mockery and their ostentatious ‘low-brow’ art.

The show’s abrupt cancellation due to public threats, however, shows that the message of the Argentinian duo was lost in translation. “We have a sanctuary in the kitchen that has more saints than the Vatican,”⁸⁷ Paolini responded. But like these other examples of Christian shock art, the exhibition was immediately charged with blasphemy and was uniquely chastised because of the displacement of holy names onto the disproportionately sized dolls whose personalities and smiles were already as transitory as their careers. If it were to gain any merit from its use of religious content, *The Plastic Religion* would demand deeper theological interpretation rather than merely the ephemeral and clichéd use of religious names and symbolism.

That, however, seemed to change when an Italian Catholic Editorial board under the acronym, SIR, wrote a critique of the show. Perhaps to draw attention away from Paolini’s artistic thesis, one of the editors raised the possibility of different interpretation of the exhibition by posing the following homiletic question: “What is the difference between provocation and bad taste?”⁸⁸ Rhetorical in nature, this question clearly points to an important issue in the approach to contemporary religious art that demand a more nuanced critique of kitsch as it relates to theology. First, is there a difference between provoking art and ‘bad taste’ or ‘kitsch’; and second, does the confusion between the two concepts interrupt the validity of Christian art as a source of true beauty and religious inspiration? Such questions tend to confirm the notion that the problem with Christian

⁸⁷ Leslie Tane, “Controversial Exhibit Of Religious Barbie Dolls Cancelled Due To Death Threats,” *Beautiful/Decay*, October 14, 2014, <http://beautifuldecay.com/2014/10/14/controversial-religious-barbie-dolls/> (accessed November 12, 2014).

⁸⁸ Josephine McKenna, “Art show with Barbie and Ken as the Virgin Mary and Jesus Outrages Bishops,” *The Huffington Post*, September 24, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/24/barbie-ken-mary-jesus_n_5877646.html (accessed October 4, 2014).

kitsch may lie in its failure to take the theology of beauty seriously, particularly as it relates to notions of form, content, and authenticity. This question of the theology of beauty is something that we will turn to next, approaching the theme through what is perhaps the most illuminating delineation between bad taste and provocation, and stimulus to the development of a theological aesthetic, in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Chapter 3

3 The Emergence of a Theological Aesthetics

In chapter 2, we showed how the phenomenon of kitsch is taken rather seriously within a range of authors from both cultural studies and theological disciplines. Since its colloquial origins, kitsch as a term to connote an industrialist aesthetic has now evolved into a popular modern sensibility that is, among other areas of contemporary culture, entrenched within the direction, composition, and aggrandizement of a subset of both Catholic Christian art and evangelical practice. To further respond to what many Christians have considered heretical, or even as an embarrassment to the visualization and formation of the Christian faith, the present chapter now begins with an examination of the most sustained treatment of a theological aesthetics in the twentieth century, which is found in the theology of Swiss-Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar.

3.1 Balthasar's theology as spiritual guidance

The most influential aspects of Balthasar's critique of the "ethos of modernism"⁸⁹ are primarily developed across the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary argument of his seven-volume treatment entitled, *The Glory of the Lord*, the first of which had been published in 1982. The peculiar genre of the text is claimed by commentator Ben Quash to be similar to that of St. Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, which distinguishes it from others by his contemporaries, as his extensive treatment of the problems of theology is less a matter of the application of a single reasonable "method"⁹⁰ than it is a guide to (almost) everything. Perhaps his esoteric writing style could also reflect his adolescent years, as Michael Murphy relates, when he was "an accomplished musician and composer from his youth....As a gifted musician, for example, he did not make music his

⁸⁹ Michael Patrick Murphy, *A Theology of Criticism: Balthasar, Postmodernism, and the Catholic Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 28.

⁹⁰ Ben Quash, "Hans Urs von Balthasar," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, Third Edition, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 110.

God or view himself, narcissistically, as the high priest of piano; rather, he saw his success in the arts, sciences, and humanities—in the disciplines—as a service of something greater than himself, as an instrument in the great symphony of being and becoming.”⁹¹ When coupled with his Christian upbringing, and his religious vocation as a Jesuit, the peculiar nature of *The Glory of the Lord* might be seen as a continuation of Balthasar’s enthusiasm for the arts in the sharing of his ardent search for beauty through Christ.

In order to set some limits on what follows, it will primarily be in Volume I of *The Glory of the Lord*, entitled *Seeing the Form*, where Balthasar orients his penchant for aesthetic theory with Christianity, that will serve as our focus in the present chapter. *Seeing the Form* illustrates Balthasar’s distinct perspective on the decidedly Catholic ways in which to recognize beauty as the revelation of God’s glory in Christ, a glory perceived through objects of theological reflection.

While no full-scale examination even of this single work is possible, the argument of this chapter entails providing a glimpse of key claims in Balthasar’s approach that will aid the development of a theological methodology to Christian art opposing the kitsch aesthetic. This will be carried out in a brief survey of his distinctive treatment of beauty in *Seeing the Form*. For Balthasar, beauty depends on the calibre of quality through which the Christ-form can be perceived within a body of Christian art and practice. Quality, he assures us, is a decidedly theological concept that anticipates and governs the true and whole expression of beauty in an object of contemplation. Perceiving the Christ-form in its beauty is guided by Balthasar in four sequential directions: a) *The Form Unfolds Itself*; b) *The Inherent Power of the Form*; c) *The Uniqueness of the Form*; d) *The Form’s Hiddenness and Its Misapprehension*. After reviewing three of the four directions briefly, the present chapter will then explore some of the theological implications of disregarding quality in the production of Christian art and its creation of a sentimental

⁹¹ Murphy, 28-29.

view of religion. A glance at the “Precious Moments Chapel” as analyzed by Frank Burch Brown introduces the vehement commentary of German Catholic theologian Richard Egenter (1902-1981), whose distinctive book entitled, *The Desecration of Christ*, warns that the complacency of kitsch sensation effectively distorts the reception of the Christian message of salvation.

3.2 The crucial role of *aisthesis* in theology

Aesthetics as perception of the form of God’s beauty in Balthasar’s theology is central to the whole of the theological project, to faith, witness and worship. Balthasar presents the glory of God as something to be experienced, an “encounter,”⁹² rather than something merely understood. He speaks of the barrenness of rationalism in evidence of much modern theology in particular, arguing that the theological vision has been impoverished precisely to the extent that such rationalism and barrenness have been exalted. What is needed in response is a renewal of aesthetics in contemporary theological discourse.

According to Balthasar, for example, in modern Catholic approaches to the conceptualization of Jesus Christ:

The figure which confronts us in Holy Scripture is more and more dissected in a ‘historical-critical’ fashion until all that is left of what was once a living organism is a dead heap of flesh, blood and bones. In the field of theology this means at every step the same inability to perceive form which a mechanistic biology and psychology reveal with regard to the unitive phenomenon of a living being. Nothing expresses more unequivocally the profound failure of these theologies than their deeply anguished, joyless and cheerless tone: torn between knowing and believing, they are no longer able to see anything, nor can they, therefore, be convincing in any visible way. Both tendencies remain fettered by Kantian formalism, for which nothing exists but the ‘material’ of the senses which is then ordered and assimilated by categorical forms or by ideas.⁹³

⁹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: Volume I, Seeing the Form*. ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark: 1982), 107.

⁹³ Ibid. 174-175. “Such a danger, it is true, is never far off when the existential dimension is played off against the ‘historical-critical’ dimension (which occurs when the modern scientific concept of truth is accepted for theology) and the result is a ‘Christ of faith’ versus an ‘historical Jesus’”. This tragic dialectic,

The historical tendency seen in Christian theology to depend on form in rationalistic, theological methods may have appeared to some extent as a protection against experiencing sensations that correspond to the modern reputation of beauty. Rationalism would represent the scientific, *wissenschaftliche* approach, without doubt, but as can be seen from the last quotation, such a scientific approach ultimately proves to be deficient, joyless, and unseeing. For Balthasar, the habitual tendency to fall back on such thinking has made the Christian vision myopic to the extent that an *impactful* sense of God's grace, which is perceived in Christian faith centrally through the death and resurrection of the "Christ of faith,"⁹⁴ recedes as a possibility and finally loses significance. This is then reflected back into many popular approaches to Christian art. In the conceptualization of many instances of modern Christian art and practice, the concept of beauty is either severely marginalized, as in critical realism, or atrociously sabotaged, as in beautifying realism.

Introducing a theological aesthetics into the core of all modern theological disciplines, as promoted by Balthasar, can then be seen as an attempt not only to clarify the widespread misunderstanding and misrepresentation of beauty in contemporary religious thought. Rather, it is also one attempt to breathe life into such religious thinking that has otherwise become anthropologically obsolete. Revitalizing the concept of *aisthesis* is necessary in light of the reverberations of these defects, which have been intensified by Enlightenment theory, by the enculturation of industrialist society, and even by the impersonal and mechanical devastation of war. This critique has obvious implications for the phenomenon of kitsch, which could be the consequence of a forgetfulness at this point, resulting in our having misunderstood and mistreated the profound role of aesthetics in theological awareness. *Aisthesis*, which is represented from the Greek by Clive Cazeaux

in which Protestant theology has largely fallen, lacks exactly the same thing as the rationalistic school of Catholic apologetics: namely, the dimension of aesthetic contemplation."

⁹⁴ Ibid., 174.

as “lived, felt experience, knowledge as it is obtained through the senses,”⁹⁵ thus becomes a matter of great importance for the theologian.

The recent surge of interest in aesthetic theory, especially in the discipline of theology, has led Cazeaux to investigate its recession in light of the tremendous value our analytical philosophical system has given to form or *eidos*, “knowledge derived from reason and intellection, from which we get the word ‘idea.’”⁹⁶ Balthasar’s theological aesthetics provides an excellent resource that can help us not only to articulate this mystery by conveying an authentic expression of reality through a wide variety of cultural forms in a way that can invoke a vision of God’s grace, but also as an essential way to critique religious kitsch. As this chapter will elucidate, Balthasar contends that showing this mystery involves balancing form (*eidos*) with content (*aisthesis*), or, in his words, the “historical Jesus”⁹⁷ (*Gestalt*) with the ‘Christ of faith’ (*Gehalt*) to reveal unprecedented beauty.

3.3 The Event of Christ

Commentator Ben Quash maintains that Balthasar’s approach to seeing beauty is “to perceive the manner of manifestation of a thing as it reveals its being, its reality.”⁹⁸ This manner, however, does not refer merely to an abstract ideal of the object of contemplation. Neither does the beauty of the object entail appraising the nominal value of its material. In what seems to be a protest against the rise of Kantian philosophy, grounded ultimately in a theology of God’s revelation in Christ, where “the Word was made flesh” (John 1:14, NRSV), Balthasar insists that “[b]oth natural and artistic form has an exterior which appears and an interior depth, both of which, however, are not

⁹⁵ Clive Cazeaux, “Introduction,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. Second Edition, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2011), xv.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁹⁷ Balthasar, 490.

⁹⁸ Quash, 111.

separable in the form itself. The content (*Gehalt*) does not lie behind the form (*Gestalt*), but within it. Whoever is not capable of seeing and ‘reading’ the form will, by the same token, fail to perceive the content. Whoever is not illumined by the form will see no light in the content either.”⁹⁹ In any case, Balthasar insists that beauty is the light emanating from within the balanced interplay of both form (*Gestalt*) and content (*Gehalt*), which exposes the distinct essence of the object of contemplation. This reciprocity, in Quash’s words, “enables us to see the work as a whole, to perceive, as [Gerard Manley] Hopkins would have said, its ‘inscape.’”¹⁰⁰ This is a theme that appears frequently in *Seeing the Form*, and serves as the foundational element to the conceptual architecture of Balthasar’s theology.

While the notable separation of *Gestalt* and *Gehalt* in Enlightenment theory serves as one of the main reasons for Balthasar’s concern to restore beauty to the study of theology, it is useful in his articulation of a theological aesthetics. Uniting them contains deep Christological undertones because, as we have seen, it demonstrates “the very centre of Christian revelation—the Word of God become flesh, Jesus Christ, God and Man.”¹⁰¹ Perceiving beauty with this incarnational understanding, then, represents the act of being a witness to Jesus Christ, which also includes being a witness to the dying and the rising of Christ. One of the key features of Balthasar’s account, however, is that this incarnational approach has implications for all Christian aesthetics. This Christological element can be seen in all of nature or, where art is concerned, in the quality of the reality they may emanate. It is imperative that the inscape of the art form as the object of contemplation actively reveals the Christological mystery in its authenticity. “The criterion of Christian art,” as Balthasar puts it, “is now seen to be whether, in the

⁹⁹ Balthasar, 151.

¹⁰⁰ Quash, 111.

¹⁰¹ Balthasar, 153.

analogia eventus pulchri et Christi, the event of the beautiful becomes a pointer to the event of Christ.”¹⁰²

Where the creation and categorization of art is concerned, regardless of its Christian label, Balthasar seems to evaluate the intensity of beauty on a qualitative scale. Instances of art that are specifically Christian, whether in ecclesiastical practice or painting, he continues, “must constantly open themselves to the question whether or not they devote all their energies to making the Word of God present, or whether they instead are constructing a form of their own which steals in as an intermediary reality to be contemplated in its own right and perhaps even to be admired. To do this would be to dull the force of God’s Word.”¹⁰³ At the same time, secular or even non-Christian art (e.g., Greek Tragedy) strains towards the same end. In the balancing of *Gestalt* and *Gehalt*, Balthasar concerns himself with the capability of all art forms to reveal the beauty of the Christ-form at its centre. Any imbalance of these notions suggests a rupture in the wholeness and a dimming of the light of the Christ-form. Theological aesthetics thus invokes the properties of quality, which, when understood theologically, depends on the “attitude of faith toward the sovereign Light.”¹⁰⁴ Contemplation of the object of theological reflection must then entail spiritual discipline and the continual practice of perceiving this light. Balthasar’s search for an effervescent beauty thus depends on recognizing the importance of true quality in our age over against “the ‘flatness’ of contemporary regard,”¹⁰⁵ and further contemplating its influence on Christian theology. Coupled with his orientation towards Christ, the concept of quality is a necessary theological concept to counter the comparatively uninspired and imbalanced aesthetics prevailing in the discourse of Enlightenment rationalism.

¹⁰² Ibid., 65.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 593.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 481.

3.4 The *lex talionis* of Quality: An ‘I’ for an ‘Eye’

Balthasar’s treatment of aesthetics in a section of *Seeing the Form* entitled, “Christ the Centre of the Form of Revelation,” presents a systematic treatment of the concept of quality. Immediately from the start, Balthasar compares the capability of acknowledging the Christ-form “to the eye of the connoisseur which can infallibly distinguish art from kitsch, excellent quality from average or merely good quality.”¹⁰⁶ But the difficulty of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics at this point is one of struggling with the following paradox: receiving this “eye for quality,”¹⁰⁷ as he puts it, must be simultaneously received with the recognition of the Christ-form—but the latter cannot be acquired without first encountering the self-giving love of God in Christ.

This process is recognized as a conditional offer, where 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, since the latter is unique of its kind for which reason its interior constitution cannot be known by being compared to other phenomena.”¹⁰⁸ Balthasar’s approach is distinctive in that it presupposes the Catholic theological idea of grace, such that in the aesthetic encounter, both Christ and the perceiver seek each other out through the experience of art. The perceiver thus recognizes the “objective and radiant rightness”¹⁰⁹ of the art, and, in turn, “[t]he illumined subject then—and ever increasingly—learns how emphatically that light derives from the object and indwells it, and in the light of the object, it learns also to distinguish it from all other objects.”¹¹⁰ With continual contemplation of a wide variety of images, likenesses, and contexts, Balthasar firmly believes that the subject will eventually be able to recognize “the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

measure which Christ represents and embodies”¹¹¹ as the ultimate and “objective proof”¹¹² of Christian revelation.

Learning to recognize quality happens through the perceiver’s navigation through four directions of contemplation. For the purposes of this chapter, three of the four directions will be discussed briefly because they can be shown to critically examine the aesthetic imbalance of *Gehalt* and *Gestalt*, which I contend is a direct analogy of kitsch sensibility. These three directions again are entitled, *The Form Unfolds Itself*, *The Inherent Power of the Form*, and *The Form’s Hiddenness and Its Misapprehension*. The third direction, *The Uniqueness of the Form* (which precedes “*The Form’s Hiddenness...*” in the text), while still important to kitsch sensibility, still deserves its own thorough treatment in another project as it takes a turn towards developing a sophisticated apprehension of Christian beauty in the wholeness of balancing *Gehalt* and *Gestalt*. Nevertheless, after traversing through these four stages, Balthasar contends that the perceiver transforms into a witness. The discipline concludes as “he grasps from his vision that the objective evidence of this form does not exclude the possibility of scandal, but, on the contrary, necessarily requires it, and this is something he can show.”¹¹³

3.4.1 Direction One: *theoria*

Part of Balthasar’s first important yet complicated direction requires the perceiver, or subject, to reconsider the approach to their concept of self-identity that he reasonably calls the ‘I’. To demonstrate, an analogy is shown through a process he refers to as “Christian contemplation.”¹¹⁴ Such reflection, he asserts, “is the opposite of distanced consideration of an image: as Paul says, it is the metamorphosis of the beholder into the

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 482.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 485.

image he beholds (2 Cor 3.18), the ‘realisation’ of what the image expresses. This is possible only by giving up one’s own standards and being assimilated to the dimensions of the image.”¹¹⁵ Engaging with the object of contemplation is an intimate and autobiographical matter. Before beauty can be encountered, the beholder is encouraged to first perceive the wholeness of object and then experience the inscape it represents. For such a process to occur, it would seem, the perceiver employs the use of an imaginative faculty to engage with its essence.

As the involvement with the image requires the perceiver to encounter with it holistically through its form and content, the perceiver is however not encouraged to remain at this stage of the direction. When the essence communicated by the image itself is then ascertained, the perceiver is encouraged to ensure a metaphysical event and relinquish what Balthasar calls the ‘I’. The resulting transformation or ‘metamorphosis’ is preparation for a revelatory event as the subject empties concepts of self to allow for the glory of God to enter in and inspire the subject.

Balthasar considers this stage of the first direction comparable to an understanding of the concept of *theoria*, wherein “[t]he image unfolds *into* the one contemplating it, and it opens out its consequences in his life. It is not I who draw my consequences from what I have seen; if I have really seen it in itself, it is the object of my vision which draws out its implications in me.”¹¹⁶ Christian contemplation is, in Balthasar’s theology, a largely biographical process. A true work of art, in his perspective, commands a power to expose the inner dispositions and struggles of the perceiver to consciousness in the manner of a confession. In this revealing direction, Balthasar shows how this element facilitated by the work of art is inherently spiritual, in that the “form which inscribes itself in the living centre of my being becomes my salvation by becoming my judgment. From this form I learn, I read, it is drummed into me what is fear of God and what is

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

sin.”¹¹⁷ In other words, this ‘unfolding’ involves orientation through unforeseen discovery, purging, and surrendering of the self to welcome the encounter with the Christ-form in its wholeness. Though first a period of intense self-examination by the ‘I,’ Christian contemplation is then followed by permitting Christ, as a ‘Thou,’ to freely invest, cleanse, and lovingly identify with the perceiver.

The effects of this investment are known by Balthasar to deeply inspire the perceiver, which is tantamount to experiencing *gravitas* in works of art. Inherent in this kind of inspiration through the art is compared to a metronomic momentum that Balthasar notices to:

wander back from the object itself to become lost in the depths of the genial subject, at a level beyond mere psychology, in the place where the mystery of reality itself has been revealed to the rare eye of the artist—so too, Christ’s particular kind of unity requires a glance that traces a course back into the very mystery of God, who manifests his ‘mystery, more dazzling than the light’, by this stroke of ‘christological genius’: he is both himself and yet also another; he is both triune and hypostatic. This is a mystery of the divine freedom, which, as in the work of art, coincides with supreme necessity.¹¹⁸

What is compelling in a work of true art, and the task of the artist, is its nature to escort the perceiver to and from these enigmatic depths. Within them, Balthasar ensures, lies the creative mystery of God. Through this enrapturing event, he states, *theoria* compels the beholder to both participate and, along with it, the chance to proclaim the insight. It is within the next direction, “The Inherent Power of the Form,” where Balthasar explains that there is a responsibility on behalf of the perceiver to carry forth and pronounce this power to others, which requires proficiency in the balance of both form (*Gestalt*) and content (*Gehalt*).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 488.

In the assessment of theological quality through the *theoria*, Balthasar admits, however, that sometimes there are ways in which this direction is not entirely successful. The failure, he suspects, is either associated with “a mistake in the construction and the proportions of the image, or that, if such a mistake is suspected, it will at once be shown to have been because of a defect of one’s own vision. We could be inclined to attribute this contemplative ‘accord’ to the naïve enthusiasm of the contemplating believer, to whom everything to do with Christ appears wonderful *a priori*.”¹¹⁹ It is not only the perceiver who is at fault, but the problem lies somewhere in the middle of the two explanations. In the former, Balthasar warns that some images lack a theological quality that may be explained by an imbalance of *Gestalt* and content *Gehalt*. What is worse, as in the latter case, is when this imbalance tricks the perceiver into apprehending the art in a way that communication of the revolutionary power of the Christ-form is present.

This dilemma is at first a problem that echoes the work of Dorfles, whose example of kitsch, as noted in the previous chapter, is the result of incongruous transpositions. “To be sure,” Balthasar alleges, “there are ‘harmonisations’ which strike us as naïve, for instance, solving exegetical difficulties by means of allegory, or projecting the image of Christ with undue haste into situations in the Old Testament. Too cheap an admiration is possible, the result of not having looked long enough into the reality before one.”¹²⁰ Part of the theological problem, as he (and Tillich) would have it, relates to how religious content is uniquely translated from one context to another. What is impacted as a result of this mistreatment is the momentum of *theoria*.

That is to say, resulting from this inertia is an eclipse of authenticity. Kitsch sensibility may thus be explained by the stagnation or reversal of *theoria*: the corrugation of the imagination, which, in Balthasar’s terminology, preserves the ‘I’ in rejection of the event of the Christ-form. This not only indicates hedonistic repercussions in the producer and

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 486.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 486.

consumer but also can severely impact the presentation of Christian content in the unfolding of truth and goodness in beauty, which is, in the words of Murphy, “ultimately static without the action of Christ. But Balthasar asserts the sway of an articulate Christology...when he foreshadows the *commercium admirabile*—the ‘wondrous exchange’—and its implications for aesthetic, dramatic, and, finally, theological interpretation.”¹²¹ Once *theoria* has stretched the perceiver’s imagination, however, the next direction of Christian contemplation begins, wherein the perceiver receives, experiences, and can further communicate the power of the Holy Spirit. He refers to this power as *dynamis*.

3.4.2 Directions Two and Four: *dynamis* & Hiddenness and its Misapprehension

As a way to explain how this power emerges from *theoria*, Balthasar claims that the task of Christian art must place equal value on the historical account (*Gestalt*) of the man Jesus in scripture, and on the spirit (*Gehalt*) that emerges from it. But in either one, “[t]aken by itself,” he suggests:

the image remains two-dimensional; the power which the New Testament describes as *dynamis* and as “Holy Spirit’ gives the image as such a plastic depth and a vital force which imposes itself and takes root in the life of believers. Both things are but one: the plasticity of the form of the ‘historical Jesus’ and his power to impress himself in the form of the ‘Christ of faith’. Should one attempt to retain only the second element and reject the first, then the Word and the Spirit would no longer be the same God and, therefore, neither of them would be God: the first would be ‘religious genius’ and the second, at best, ‘enthusiasm’.¹²²

For such a concern to appear in Balthasar’s work implies that actively balancing Word and Spirit to facilitate beauty in the composition of modern Christian art is by no means

¹²¹ Murphy, 112.

¹²² Balthasar, 490. Here, these two concepts, ‘religious genius’ and ‘enthusiasm’, closely relate to Roland Barthes’ terms *stadium* and *punctum*, respectively. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984).

an easy task. The effects of not adhering to this discipline are twofold. On the one hand, emphasis on the ‘Christ of faith’ through a work of art or ecclesial practice is criticized as a merely enthusiastic interpretation of spirituality without communicating the expanse of the historical context. On the other end of Balthasar’s spectrum is the modern practice of historically deconstructing Jesus for the purposes of evacuating his person of theological significance, which forgets the enrapturing and compelling experience of the Christ of faith. To serve as a brief illustration near the end of *Seeing the Form*, he shows that “a poet who has the total vision of his poetic work before his eyes can begin with rough drafts and verse fragments which can be correctly interpreted only if one knows their final form.”¹²³ While not at first kitsch, this illustration can point to an imbalance in the execution of art. Namely, it is the potential to recklessly transpose the content (*Gestalt*) with the intended form (*Gestalt*), the result of which may be an incongruous transposition.

In either of the cases, a one-sided attention to what we might largely speak of as the historical Word or as the theological Spirit demonstrates a partial approach to the beauty of the whole Christ-form. Each of these perspectives taken alone lacks its counterpart, which is needed to emanate the light of faith. The problem is that an asymmetrical evaluation fails to produce *dynamis*, and thus cannot rightly be called beautiful in a theological sense. In the case of historical rationalism, for example, Balthasar observes that the “Holy Spirit is a reality which is ignored by the philologists and the philosophers of comparative religion, or which is at least ‘provisionally bracketed’ by them.”¹²⁴ The light of faith empowered by *dynamis* is prone to fade as a result of this marginalization. Ben Quash also reports that, on account of the fading, theology as a whole thus “loses its power to attract and to convince; it ceases to be concrete and concerns itself with the abstract, that which is perceived as the condition of the possibility of any perception at

¹²³ Ibid., 539.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 494.

all.”¹²⁵ In the loss of beauty as concrete wholeness, the power of the Holy Spirit seems somehow strange and perhaps a crucial aspect of beauty to be feared in separation. The growth of this estrangement, I contend with Tillich, represents a crucial aspect part of the dilemma mediating the composition of Christian kitsch sensibility in modern approaches to artful participation in theological practice, in the body of the Church, and in the faith of Christ.

The model perceiver who follows Balthasar’s first two directions and engages with qualitative Christian art is, by contrast, defined by his or her capacity to begin envisioning the authenticity and wholeness of the Christ-form. Now able to exercise this aesthetic discernment, the Christian envisions the world through restored or ‘new’ eyes. The witness, as he or she would then become, can identify the element of quality and further separate the lack of it, or bad taste, from authentic beauty—that which is truly provoking.

3.4.3 Fragmentary *dynamis*

These two directions represent a portion of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics that is, without doubt, an ambitious and challenging task. The Christ-form, understood by Balthasar as the “Unique One,”¹²⁶ who is unimaginable in human terms and yet who is encountered holistically by virtue of his own self-giving, is difficult if not altogether impossible to represent visually in practice.¹²⁷ Realizing this complication provides an alternate or additional explanation for how Karl Pawek and others before him have tended to comment that in the shattering aftermath of Industrialism, “sacred art cannot exist today.”¹²⁸ Or, at least, sacred art cannot exist *as it used to be*. Such judgments,

¹²⁵ Quash, 111.

¹²⁶ Balthasar, 468, 502.

¹²⁷ Acknowledging the Christ-form as “The Unique One,” anticipates future studies in the comparison of Olalquiaga’s understanding of “uniqueness” and “authenticity”.

¹²⁸ Pawek, 145.

however, may reflect what Balthasar sees as the inability to balance Word and Spirit to procure *dynamis* in its purest form. While even though modernity has shattered the opportunity to allow for the appearance of the authentic—or sacred—quality in art, Timothy Gorringer advises that “[t]he task of theology involves a struggle against kitsch. Against that we have to proceed with merciless sharpness.”¹²⁹ To make matters worse, however, absence or at least a fragmentary *dynamis* is actually held up with reverence as if it were unquestionably holy. Appropriating Balthasar’s theology at this point, however, can only represent a useful and intelligent response in this struggle. The model is particularly frustrating for Richard Egenter because he, too, recognizes that an imbalance has even presented itself in his observations of the “pious man.”¹³⁰ In them, “[d]ynamism is lacking, for these people are enjoying the peace that Christ did not bring. That peace which radiates through hurts and necessities endured, which is the fruit of self-forgetting and strenuous faith, hope and charity, of this they convey no hint.”¹³¹ *Dynamis*, from this perspective, can also be understood as an element to enliven form. Kitsch indicates the weightlessness of Christian involvement, suggests a very partial grasp of beauty, and therefore the momentum of the Christ-form ceases.

As another way of explaining the estrangement of *dynamis*, Balthasar points again to the “screen”¹³² imparted by the sheer prominence of “German Idealism and Classicism.”¹³³ The analogy that follows explains his critique of this idealism to explain that the expanse of this tyrannical ideology is noted to gloss over representations of the Christ-form that point to profound theological insights. As Balthasar notes in direction four, “The Form’s

¹²⁹ Gorringer, 229.

¹³⁰ Richard Egenter, *The Desecration of Christ*, trans. Edward Quinn, ed. Nicolette Gray (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1967), 122.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹³² Balthasar, 513.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 514.

Hiddenness and its Misapprehension,” such Enlightenment thinking has developed the formulaic tendency to promote:

a pitifully faded image of Christ. . . . Even in the Catholic restoration it is not Christ himself who is contemplated, but rather the remotely derived cultural effects of Christianity: the ‘harmonious disposition’ found in the Church (Chateaubriand), the reliability of the primitive tradition, the poetic and mystical character of the Middle Ages. . . . In polemics and apologetics alike we find the same blinking eyes and batting eyelashes. This stems from a certain modesty that prevents courtly and bourgeois eras from speaking directly about what is most immediate: the preference to refer to it indirectly, in the reflection of custom and piety. But such ‘modesty’ quickly becomes a pretext for forgetfulness, a pretext for obstructing the paths to the essential.¹³⁴

What is in effect censored by the screen of German rationalism is the paschal mystery of the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ—the ‘it’ to which Balthasar refers in the penultimate sentence. New ways of envisioning the light of faith are required without the guiding light of beauty, which, referring to Murphy again, fashions for us a sanitized and superficial new way of envisioning Christianity:

[t]he great crime of modern aesthetics, ironically, is the pacification of beauty. We create zones of purity that do not admit that the harsh realities of human frailty and brutal experience are part of our experience, part of the great mysterious drama of being. We can see how we are still complicit in our collective realities by turning away from the world—whether in the form of gated communities, the spiritual hideout of antidepressants, or the ‘beauty’ pushed in paintings by Thomas Kinkade—and how our various denials contributed to Auschwitz and contribute to the Auschwitzes that exist today. . . . [W]e are paying a high price for our lack of imagination.¹³⁵

The emotional dispositions entailed in this sensitivity to suffering is problematic in this bourgeois trend because this Christianity has developed into actual negligence of the scandal of Christ’s death on the cross. According to Balthasar, what is overlooked is the one thing that is needed in theology: the gruesome horror simultaneously with the glory

¹³⁴ Ibid., 514-515.

¹³⁵ Murphy, 112-113.

of the kenosis of the cross. On account of its estrangement, the event is then rendered impotent, and the salvation that the death anticipates is denied.

Dismissing or sanitizing the element of horror in the event of the cross on account of its brutality thus has wider implications than the mere dampening of the reality of the cross in mindless kitsch entertainment. In fact, there are dehumanizing consequences. The cultural theorists, Holliday and Potts, agree: “kitsch is the inauthentic and, with this, the substitute memory, which, in confounding the testimonial process, potentially manifests as an *aesthetic forgetting* which ensures the repetition of Auschwitz.”¹³⁶ The theological complications include an amnesic character, which, when presented by the lack of quality, also convey deep political and moral implications that have resulted in the perversion of Christian art. As Călinescu puts it, “[k]itsch is the direct artistic result of an important ethical mutation.”¹³⁷ To apply Călinescu’s judgment to our own question, Christian kitsch might be the direct theological result of an important faith mutation. Referred to in the previous chapters, this mutation can be seen again in the ‘faith’ paintings produced and promoted by Thomas Kinkade. But in order to advance the argument, the estrangement can also be seen to manifest rather wonderfully in a popular religious tourist attraction, to which we now turn for the purposes of illustration.

3.5 “No More Tears”

No discussion of how awful modern Christian kitsch art is would be complete without reference to Frank Burch Brown’s treatment of the notorious “Precious Moments Chapel,” located in Carthage, Missouri. Included in his book called *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste*, Brown describes the development of modern-day kitsch as reaching a pinnacle of expression in this particular building. As an instance of “classic

¹³⁶ Holliday and Potts, 205.

¹³⁷ Călinescu, 248.

kitsch,”¹³⁸ he notes that the designer and architect, Samuel J. Butcher, sought “to translate into an immediately accessible American vernacular something of the effect of the great religious art of the Renaissance.”¹³⁹ Yet its unfaithful resemblance to the Sistine Chapel, particularly in the censorship of Michelangelo’s chaotic rendition of the return of Christ in *Last Judgment* (1534-1541), is only the beginning of what will soon follow as the greater crime of modern aesthetics in its treatment of the content of the Christian message.

In his walk through the Chapel, Brown observes that “the vision of Christianity projected by the chapel and its murals might appear so partial and selective as to constitute a distortion of the gospel, not merely an accessible translation.”¹⁴⁰ Instead of uniting its visitors with the wrath and judgment of Christ, “Butcher [only] gives us a kinder, gentler gospel: the mildest possible image of heavenly rewards, in a setting more placid than inspiring. That sin could possibly have dire consequences is never visualized at all, even if it is somehow presumed.”¹⁴¹ “Precious Moments Chapel” presents American society with both an incongruous transposition of the Gospel, and a blatantly censored rendition of Christianity.

This particular censorship may be explained by the uniqueness of Butcher’s knowledge of Christian content. According to Brown, who had watched the video documentation of the history of the chapel, Butcher “has always understood the experience of seeing the world through a child’s eyes as something virtually inseparable from his faith and witness as a Christian artist. He seems to have taken as his motto Jesus’ words that, unless we

¹³⁸ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 141.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

become as children, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 18.3).”¹⁴² To illustrate this presumably humbling perspective, Brown makes note of how the outside of the chapel literally welcomes visitors with a mural of “an expansive scene in heaven, with two angelic children in the foreground holding up signs: ‘Welcome,’ followed by ‘To Your Heavenly Home,’ but with the welcome sign accidentally held upside down by the child in charge of it. Farther to the right, one child stands in front of a small golden doorway leading into the square itself. The door bears the words ‘No More Tears.’”¹⁴³ This third sign captures the sensibility of Butcher’s Christianity, and is pivotal to understanding the wider paradox of Christian kitsch. It is in one way a powerful form of manipulation and censorship, one that forbids tears of one kind, in favour of anticipating the shedding of another: the sentimental tears of comfort and enjoyment.

The metaphor that closely aligns with a deeper theological concern in perhaps what could be a literal example of Balthasar’s critique of the formulaic, clichéd, and largely obsolete appeal to bourgeois taste. Brown claims that this sign is reminiscent of Milan Kundera’s conceptualization of kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a novel famously illustrating the paradox of kitsch as the shedding of two tears.¹⁴⁴ Brown applies Kundera’s formula to the chapel, and by extension to the “Precious Moments” corporation at large, reciting that “the first tear springs from thinking how nice it is to see the children in the role of angels or prophets or figures from the parables; a second tear would follow, tainted by the cloying awareness of how very nice it is to be here and to be moved—as is everyone else is—by the sight of those dear children with teardrop eyes.”¹⁴⁵ While the religious aesthetic associated with this chapel and the religious

¹⁴² Ibid., 140.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 139.

¹⁴⁴ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: HarperPerennial, 1984), 251. “Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.”

¹⁴⁵ Brown, 141.

emotions it evokes in its pious wayfarers are at first the impression of kitsch, I contend, along with Brown, that the feelings of modesty at the universal level, symbolized by the second “learned, not natural”¹⁴⁶ tear, take us straight to the root of Christian kitsch. To make this charge clearer, further attention needs to be paid to the kind of theological quality that this second tear dictates, for this is plainly symbolized by how Butcher handles the crucifixion.

Upon entering the inside of the chapel and observing the sequential order of the life of Christ, which is also made available on hand-painted china plates for purchase, Brown tells us that the vignette on which the crucifixion scene is portrayed “occupies one rather small roundel.... In the foreground of the scene we do not see the Crucifixion itself. Instead, we see children in the role of the women and disciples as they mourn amid happily flowering (or at least budding) shrubs. One little figure among the mourners already looks toward the next roundel, which shows the reassuring angel beside the empty tomb. In the background, the three stick-like crosses are barely visible on a distant hilltop.”¹⁴⁷ Since it is hardly a “precious moment,” the crucifixion is shown receding infinitely into the blue sky backdrop, in a treatment which might serve as a quintessential example of bad taste for Balthasar’s critique of modern theological aesthetics. “In order to see the form of the Redeemer,” as Balthasar puts it, “a turning is necessary: a turning away from one’s own image and a turning to the Image of God. And here lies the whole problem of the representation of Jesus in images, particularly of his suffering.”¹⁴⁸ In Butcher’s attempt at representing the Christ-form, we are forced to turn away and ruminate on the collective sadness of the crowd instead of contemplating the paradoxical beauty of the cross and Christ-event. Not only are we, the viewers, separated by a greater distance from Christ than they are, but we are also literally separated from it by the point of interest of the painting inside the Chapel.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 146.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 141.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 522.

To partially vouch for the incongruous transposition of Christian content, Brown explains that Butcher is working with components of sentimentality, “formulas that trigger a predictably tearful or heart-warming response but that offer no new insight, and in fact tend to trivialize genuine religious feeling, and so to profane what is sacred.”¹⁴⁹ In Butcher’s theological aesthetic, the cross is comprehensively filtered through the lens of the collective sensitivity of bourgeois American modesty to anything that might actually prove to challenge it.

3.6 Pneumatophobia

Even though the importance of “Precious Moments Chapel” may be relativized by its function as a tourist attraction, rather than as an actual place of worship (though this itself may be something decidedly kitsch), the evidence that the Chapel exists with this particular type of aesthetic that is decidedly popular is the actual issue at hand. If *dynamis* as understood by Balthasar is not facilitated by this Chapel, then the question of the appeal of “Precious Moments” and other tourist chapels still arises—not least because of the danger that actual Churches might be constructed in this manner. In dialogue with Balthasar’s theory of *dynamis*, Karl Pawek’s observation of the absence of *dynamis* as the representation of the universal “watering-down of the current theological spirit and consciousness”¹⁵⁰ is relevant to this discussion.

The sheer lack of substance in what so many of the commodities companies and Churches alike have promoted suggests that communities of people who demand, produce, and furthermore enjoy Christian kitsch could be explained by the fear of *dynamis*. In light of the current analysis, it might even be posited that some religious art deliberately counterfeits representations of the Christ-form in kitsch in order to avoid

¹⁴⁹ Brown, 144.

¹⁵⁰ Pawek, 149.

encountering such *dynamis*, effectively in a kind of response to a learned anxiety. This is a response that resonates in the anthropological sketch provided by cultural critic and artist, Betty Spackman:

[m]any (dare I say most) evangelicals are afraid of images because they are afraid of imagination and of the body. They desire, but do not know how, to embody faith safely. The fear of ‘stumbling into sin’ is greater than faith in a God who promises an abundant life in the here and now. Many Christians tend to intellectually separate flesh and spirit, mind and body. Because of this there is a lot of confusion about the arts, which incorporate the whole person in visual expressions that are corporeal as well as intellectual. A deliberate distancing from the arts for protection (often with the pretense of piety) has therefore often been the solution.... However, when it comes to the arts, which normally challenge the viewer and require some form of participation, many Christians become suspect. And when they actually risk creating art the tendency has been to make watered down, sentimental, feel-good images that promote no awe, no challenge, and no understanding of a dynamic faith in a dynamic God. They only reinforce established familiar norms and secure feelings.¹⁵¹

A Church adorned in kitsch aesthetics, therefore, does not adequately prepare its congregation for the encounter of *dynamis* through the Christ-form. Nor, in its distancing of a thorough comprehension of art and embodiment, does it know why or how it might do so. The result is that, instead, it inadvertently offers its members instructions on how to dodge *dynamis*.

Spackman’s conclusion tends to support both Balthasar’s and Tillich’s insight, and at the same time, provides an explanation for why people continue to estrange themselves from the profundity of the cross. The showcasing appeal of Christian kitsch relies on a rather beguiling aesthetic that appears to promote what seems to be good quality, but that can only do so by actually bypassing the terrifying gravity of the very foundations of Christian faith.

¹⁵¹ Betty Spackman, “Reconsidering “Kitsch”,” *Material Religion* 1, no. 3 (2005): 411-412, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=19167734&site=ehost-live>.

As a cultural supplement to this discussion in an analysis of the material culture produced after September 11, Holliday and Potts point out how kitsch sensibility is heavily involved with corporate strategies. In their conclusions, they declare that the psychology working to generate the kitsch aesthetic “indicates a profound collective amnesia and the very opposite of remembrance. Worse still, this substitute reality short-circuits any possibility of a meaningful response by offering premature, insulating comfort: we are made to feel better effectively before we feel anything. If...to extract comfort or redemption from the disaster is to violate the terms of the telling, then...to kitschify is both to bear false witness and to frustrate the project of mourning.”¹⁵² In religious terms, of course, the comforting and often placating function of kitsch is perhaps understandable: comfort is precisely what many conventionally good religious people want.

Comfort can even be sacralised on the basis of the popular interpretation of the work of the Holy Spirit, who is conventionally known as ‘the Comforter,’ on the basis of a highly traditional but inadequate translation of the Greek of the New Testament. However, we have seen another interpretation of the work of the Holy Spirit in Balthasar’s treatment of the pneumatological sources of *dynamis*, which leads to a very different view of the role of the Spirit in the maintenance and the creation of a Christian art. The curse of Christian kitsch (or ‘kitschcraft’) needs to be challenged, and if the Holy Spirit is understood in this way, as leading into the depths rather than as always keeping people on the surface, then we have at least the theological beginnings of an answer to the challenge represented by “Precious Moments.” If we are to avoid misrepresenting the meaning of the cross of Christ, in short, then such artistic manoeuvring must be more publicly recognized as a transgression.

In order to clarify this point, appeal can be made again to Egenter, who, in a way reminiscent of Tillich, observes that, “in the experience of kitsch is concealed the capital

¹⁵² Holliday and Potts, 220.

sin of *acedia*, sloth, which makes us fretfully turn away from what leads to God, from the world of spiritual things, from the truly beautiful, good and holy, and in the last resort from supernatural grace, because all these things cost effort.”¹⁵³ Put more commonly, kitsch sensibility does not require the theological efforts involved in serious contemplation and direct witness. This resonates with Brown’s conclusions, in that “religious kitsch tends to have something about it that is cheap or counterfeit—quick and easy, or illusory,”¹⁵⁴ but in a way that falsely and deviously attributes to the work a higher value.

Suspicious of these higher values, Egenter attributes the pious sentiments that reflect innocence to the very *guile* of kitsch, which “represents the semi-Christian or unchristian attitude which is concerned with security at all costs.... And here lies the most serious of the charges against kitsch; it is a fundamental deception about the message of salvation; it leads us to forget that humanity needed to be saved, and in doing so it makes the Cross of our Lord unintelligible and superfluous.”¹⁵⁵ If kitsch art is left to steep in the atmosphere of Christian worship, then the semantics involved with salvation will alter, which indicates the need for an entirely polemical attitude towards its prominence in contemporary forms of worship. Egenter goes so far as to claim that the deception of kitsch, usually taken quite sincerely at face value, actually replaces what salvation should mean in the Christian tradition. Quietly but relentlessly, by displacing the meaning of salvation with shallow implications and superficial emotions, the charm of kitsch Christianity is elusively re-writing the formula of salvation by tampering, perhaps, with first-hand impressions of judgment and redemption.

¹⁵³ Egenter, 89.

¹⁵⁴ Brown, 147.

¹⁵⁵ Egenter, 121-122.

3.7 Infantilism

Almost seamlessly over the history of modern art, our interpretations of Christian salvation have changed how the Christ-form in religious art is presented and experienced, and with these, beauty has changed for the worse on how it might be interpreted, produced, and received within the visualization of modern worship practices. While the mistranslation of the Holy Spirit demonstrates a corruption in the theology that goes into the production of kitsch, its distribution becomes prone to other layers of interpretation that further frustrate definitions of beauty. Reference is made to Pawek again, who worries that “it is not merely a question of whether this interpretation touches on the actual Christian element, on the pneumatological aspect, but also of the type of sentimental world of ideas which this ‘religious’ concept encourages.”¹⁵⁶ The repetition of kitsch has itself cultivated its own unique sensibility, which is proficiently demonstrated by the sensibility of the “Precious Moments Chapel,” and appears to substitute in heavy emotional gratification that is decidedly opposite to the theological depth of the Christian mystery. Pawek’s hypothesis implies that in this gradual change, the imposing *dynamis* essential to what makes a Christian message distinct and provoking eventually softens. The desire for merely comforting or, in some other cases, showy and glamorous clichés often masquerade as ‘religious’. In these cases, something deep has been made shallow by those objects whose entire power spawns from their quick production, wide marketability, and sentimental appeal.

The circulation of post-war holy cards in Britain illustrating a sensual and refined Virgin Mary holding her baby Jesus are definite examples criticized by Egenter that show this substitution. A modernized woman softly embellished with light pastel colours in the image is depicted, and “is dressed and posed in a way which immediately shows that she is meant to represent our Lady, but her face is that of a film-star or pin-up girl. It is the dressing up, the exploitation of religious associations, and the consequent hypocrisy

¹⁵⁶ Pawek, 148.

which makes this kitsch.”¹⁵⁷ While it may seem that the design does not impose any harm to the core of Christian thought as it appeals to modern culture, these sensual images are problematic in his critique precisely because they desensitize the sexualized reference implicit in a film-star Mary and amplify the sentimentality observed within the maternal connection between mother and child. The forms previously associated with the suggestive content are then increasingly understood as sentimental because they are protected as ‘religious’.

The ubiquity of these classic images as well as the intention to build and inaugurate religious buildings like “Precious Moments Chapel” certainly validate this peculiar aesthetic as a common way to practice and observe Christianity. These cards are also taken into the consideration of Dorfles, who says it is quite common that “ancient and sacred symbols are used quite openly in an irreverent way in anachronistic and artistically clumsy images...such as the Virgin and Child and so on, where the hieratic iconography of the religious images which has now become an emblem is translated into the vulgar physical charms of any photographic model.”¹⁵⁸ But the critical issue for Egenter happens precisely when, from viewing these images, the “titillation of senses is brought in under the cover of piety. This is evil kitsch; for the naïve viewer it is scandal in the biblical sense.”¹⁵⁹ Disentangling the modern concept of piety from the powerful association of sensuality with the Christian scandal, demands a gesture similar to Balthasar’s directions found within his theological aesthetics. Adhering to Egenter’s argumentation, the composition of the object of theological reflection should closely align with encountering “a true work of art [in which] the world of sense, and pleasure through the senses, is seized upon and mastered by higher values. In this process they lose that self-sufficiency which tends towards mere sensual pleasure and become instead

¹⁵⁷ Egenter, 46.

¹⁵⁸ Dorfles, “Religious trappings,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Universe Books, 1975), 142.

¹⁵⁹ Egenter, 45.

the vehicle for a spiritual content; external beauty is intensified by embodying a beauty of the spirit. Evil kitsch exhibits the opposite process; higher values are used and dragged down to sensual—undesirable—ends and so poisoned.”¹⁶⁰ It is clear that, for both Egenter and Balthasar alike, the formula inherent in the uniqueness of Christian kitsch is a direct reversal of the aesthetic approaches that instead hide rather than show artistic *dynamis* in Christian art and theological contemplation. Where the transformative goals of modern Christian art for many modern religious critics often begin with exploiting comfort and sentimentality to produce authentic and provoking representations of reality, the goal of kitsch instead begins with softening and eventually removing provocation from any context. This is done, in their opinion, to maintain a version of Christianity that seeks to indulge in comforting sensations, and so as to perhaps conceal a more complex phenomenon and erase the accountability that comes with rendering challenging and subversive situations.

The relationship between comfort and Christian kitsch begins to reveal yet another variable that Egenter contends is appealing to those who demonstrate “infantilism in their religious life.”¹⁶¹ Closely related to the maternal aspect in the holy cards, it is clear that the juvenile style associated with many forms of Christian kitsch is neither necessarily meant for, nor always consumed by children; instead, as he clearly points out, it is “liked by adults—who after all are the people who buy this ‘twee’ religious art.”¹⁶² Similarly, the number of visitors attending, or escaping to, “Precious Moments Chapel,” whether or not it is labelled a church or a tourist attraction, is constituted by the very same age range of the population. While offering a means of comfort, the infantilism aspect latent in some instances of Christian kitsch offers, as Călinescu sees it, a form of mature “regression” to those “unable to cope with the strains and complexities of modern life,” a

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 44, 110, 152.

¹⁶² Ibid., 44.

kind of “escape via *kitsch*.”¹⁶³ Modeling this interpretation in a larger sense, the “Precious Moments Chapel” effectively piggybacks on the theological element inherent in the Christian themes of creation and redemption to reinforce the power and prominence of the infantile imagery fashioned by the corporation.

Christian kitsch, in this case, is not immediately the stylization of the children in the “Precious Moments Chapel,” but rather the uniqueness of sentimental connections that fluctuate between them and the chapel’s visitors. For designer Samuel Beckett, and for those who seek and feel them, these connections and the universal tears are unquestionably thought to be ‘religious’.¹⁶⁴ While these tender bonds are difficult to break because of their tense entanglement with Christian themes, Călinescu nonetheless finds that infantilism and nostalgia are, at bottom, inherently symbolic: “[i]f kitsch thrives on aesthetic infantilism, it is only fair to say that it also offers pedagogical possibilities, including the important realization that there is a difference between kitsch or pseudoart and art.”¹⁶⁵ The same nostalgic paradigm that is liable to confuse bad taste with provocation, I would contend, transports over into objects of Christian kitsch and thus translates into the solemnness enjoyed in purchasing and consuming other objects of kitsch like *Scripture Tea*. The dormant confusion that kitsch evokes in the consumer and producer of kitsch can refer to the adolescence of modernity, a notion that again points to what many have considered a philosophical crisis.

¹⁶³ Călinescu, 256.

¹⁶⁴ The choice to enjoy and participate in kitsch, rather than engaging with the challenging realities of the Christian experience, are explored in anthropological accounts describing the very consumers of kitsch. Their profile is commonly known as the kitsch-man or *kitschmensch*, as made popular by French philosopher, Abraham Moles (1920-1992). While Moles’ theories important to the development of this project, a contemporary sketch of the *kitschmensch* today and its implications it has on the theological project demands further articulation in a future task. Essays by Ludwig Giesz, Hermann Broch, Matei Călinescu, Ruth Holliday & Tracey Potts, Frank Burch Brown, to list a few authors, devote analysis to an investigation of the behavioural aspects of the modern consumer and the tendency to maintain and participate with the kitsch aesthetic.

¹⁶⁵ Călinescu, 258.

3.8 The “Collapse”

Our treatment of the problem of Christian kitsch in this chapter began with the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar. His work is of interest in this context, not because it is an ultimate statement, or a definitive work on the subject. In fact, there are general weaknesses in his account, such as the omission of aesthetic theory outside of religious discourse. This, of course, requires supplementation from a wider body of literature. Nevertheless, Balthasar does suggest new tactics for wrestling with these trends in Christian material culture, in Christian theology, and in aesthetic theory. His unique approach is, I would suggest, particularly relevant to the critique of modern Christian kitsch in its evolution into a more complex aesthetic.

Balthasar finds value in continuously exploring and developing the notion of quality to compensate for the stagnation of Christian aesthetic education in modern forms of worship and outreach. Contemporary proponents of the visual arts, he advocates, should critically examine how true quality can be integrated within forms of Christian representation to ensure that the glory of God in a post-Enlightenment era can be authentically imagined and further communicated. In essence, he insists that there ought to be an analogical relation between our evolving cultural arts, and the self-giving love of God in Jesus Christ, which in its depth is, for Balthasar, the very being of God.

At this point, and anticipating the final chapter of this thesis, a nod seems appropriate in the direction of the analytical work of English philosopher and BBC television series host, Roger Scruton, whose self-declared “archaeological”¹⁶⁶ excursion through culture devotes a section on the relationship between kitsch, theology, and the avant-garde. His approach is reminiscent of Călinescu’s *Five Faces of Modernity*, for they both organize Western culture into an array of transitional phases. Following the advent of modernism, it is Scruton, however, who explains the appearance of kitsch as the inevitable crisis in

¹⁶⁶ Scruton, 4.

modern aesthetics. Of particular interest within his dialectics is his explanation of kitsch as a blatant sign of a particular *religious* crisis.

Sharing the same theoretical semblances as Călinescu, Olalquiaga, and even Balthasar, Scruton assures us that kitsch sensibility is by no means accidental. The cringes and groans that we may otherwise receive from viewing objects like *Scripture Tea* are also correlated to an inevitable “religious phenomenon—an attempt to disguise the loss of faith, by filling the world with fake emotions, fake morality and fake aesthetic values.”¹⁶⁷

There lies an uncertainty in deciding whether or not Christian-themed products like *Scripture Tea* are sources of religious devotion, especially when juxtaposed with other commodities like a box of *Testamints*, which are candies that are similarly wrapped with individual verses of Christian scripture. Many of these infrequent manifestations of Christian popular culture on store shelves can be seen as illustrations of what Scruton maintains is occurring at a global level, namely, the loss of the ability to determine bad taste from provocation.

When kitsch is produced without awareness that it is, in fact, kitsch, the promotion of the art or object as a reflection of true theological quality is rather felt as the sensation of the loss of faith. Perceived in this manner, objects of Christian kitsch are religious mementos that apparently proclaim the passing away of the very thing they claim to remember and represent. What kitsch speaks of is not so much remembrance of the Christ-event, which ought to be central to Christian art, but a rather certain mourning about the loss of an authentic way of experiencing beauty through God’s grace in art, music, clothing, sermon, or for that matter, kitchen staple, and breath mint—which seems to have existed before contemplation was altered by “the collapse of the modernist project.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 86.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 83.

We saw how, in the first chapter, Olalquiaga's observations concerning Industrialism entailed the division of cultural perception into its respective frameworks of uniqueness and authenticity. This may be reflective of Scruton's reference to the collapse of modernism and the resulting inability to retrieve a vision of authenticity in the creation and promotion of religious art. Literary critic, Terry Eagleton, evokes a similar way of perceiving culture in what may be a reference to the pioneering, psychoanalytic theories of Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979).¹⁶⁹ "With the advent of modernism," Eagleton echoes, "the two main senses of culture, aesthetic and anthropological, are increasingly riven apart.... The contest between culture as art and culture as form of life is one between minority and popular culture, which from now on confront one another as mortal rivals."¹⁷⁰ In their rivalry, both seem to make claims to a sense of beauty. Looking back to Balthasar, similarly, we have these two senses *Gestalt* and *Gehalt*, which are liable to produce kitsch without the other assisting in the holistic representation of beauty. The task that emerges from Balthasar's theology is thus one of attempting to reconcile the aesthetic and anthropological sensibilities for the pronouncement of *dynamis* and, for Scruton, the return of a faith-based perception of the world.

The anthropological methods of deductive reasoning have, in Scruton's vision, heavily influenced the ways in which the approach to religion is made in modernity. Examples characteristic of this end of the cultural perspective include, for instance, studies conducted by Durkheim and Weber to show that there are certain religious truths that can be, more or less, measured and predicted. But while these ways of understanding religion are influential in terms of seeking data and organizing facts for Western scholarship, they are, for Scruton, also isolating and disconnecting. This represents for him "the collapse," as "[s]cience does not make these truths more easily perceivable: on the contrary, it prompts us to see our situation from outside, to consider human emotion as we might

¹⁶⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 79.

¹⁷⁰ Eagleton, 182.

consider the mating habits of curious insects, and so clouds the psyche with fantasies. The result is a corruption of the very language of feeling, a decline from sensibility to sentimentality, and a veiling of the human world. The paradox is this: the falsehoods of religious faith reveal the truths that matter.”¹⁷¹ In other words, the entrenchment of rationalism in modern educational institutions has conditioned an estrangement of the close, intimate occurrences in daily life. Echoing the analysis of Clement Greenberg, Scruton suggests that at its core the function of kitsch does not reconcile but instead blurs this distinction. In its deception, Scruton reminds us that kitsch can only imitate the effects of faith without itself being a proper object of theological contemplation.

To further explain how this loss of faith is concealed, the next chapter employs the work of English theologian, Graham Ward, as well as Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, whose energetic psychoanalysis of post-modern Christian ideology will prove to be advantageous to the development of contemporary theological aesthetics, to faith, and to the integrity of Christian materialism.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 81.

Chapter 4

4 Towards a New Theological Aesthetics

In this penultimate chapter, the trajectory of the kitsch experience can be addressed by uniting the complementary insights of Graham Ward and Slavoj Žižek. It is Ward's explanation that kitsch now defines a collective experience created by corporate spiritual centres, which thrive on the consumerist demand only for the "special effects" of religion. To counter this, appeal can be made to Žižek, who contends that the authentic Christian experience must return to its materialism with a renewed perspective of the theology governing objects of theological contemplation.

4.1 Reconsidering "Sentimentality"

An important goal of this thesis has been the construction of an alternate framework in the light of which to address the tacit crisis in modern religious thought that has manifested in popular culture as Christian kitsch. In developing such a perspective, we saw how the crisis can be better explained through appeal to Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics, whose articulation of Christian beauty is based on the active balancing of form (*Gestalt*) and content (*Gehalt*) for the preparation of potent theological quality. The closer these complement each other in artistic practice, the stronger the release of *dynamis*. According to Balthasar, this is the deep-seated and animating force essential to provocative Christian art, but when form and content are disproportionate in context, artistic *dynamis* fades. In some noteworthy cases, the influence of the kitsch aesthetic on Christian art and practice as a radical imbalance of these attributes is held, promoted, and even blessed as if it were truly *beautiful*. This, I contend, is what primarily happens in the phenomenon of Christian kitsch.

The acclimatization of this pattern in religious practice therefore evidences a serious problem in the approach to Christian beauty in the holistic sense. In the promotion of Christian kitsch, the resulting poverty of *dynamis* represents a subordination of Christian art and worship to "bad taste," which has affected the reputation of a powerful and dynamic religious perspective. Cues from cultural studies indicate that the modern

function of the kitsch aesthetic generates the inclination to feel “sentimental,” where the assumption is that kitsch is a source of true Christian beauty and representative of the glory of God. This thesis continues a similar line of argumentation, contending that the appeal to the sentimental kitsch in the art of Christian practice actually prevents an experience of true Christian beauty, and manifests as an evasive inability to encounter its authentic *dynamis*. The recession of this dynamic perspective in religious thought further prevents people from confidently distinguishing “bad taste” from authentically provoking art in contemporary religious demonstrations, exhibitions, and practices.

For Roger Scruton, who as we have seen shares a similar opinion to Betty Spackman in her analysis of evangelical Christian art, the base theoretical mechanism of kitsch in the approach to Christian arts and craft depends on a process of loss. Thus, the presence of kitsch in the Christian experience coalesces into a mannerism that elusively parodies a loss of faith. Scruton’s anthropological observations include reference to the recent inception and success of spiritual centres and big business organizations that revolve around spiritual welfare, which are commercial champions of this particular trend. He traces the Western phenomenon of kitsch as an aesthetic that catalyzes these, “New Age spasms which briefly shake the young, some overtly denying it, as in the now extinct, or at any rate dormant, volcanoes of fascism and communism.”¹⁷² While these energetic trends are not conventionally representative of traditional objects of kitsch, Scruton offers the perspective that the advent of such sweeping, eccentric groups share similar elements that are inherent within the kitsch sensation, even if they do deny it. In his opinion, “each represents a surge of visceral collective feeling, as people lose themselves in a cause that will swamp the psyche and drown the grief of solitude.”¹⁷³ His observations suggest that kitsch has transcended its close association with devotional objects, and now points to a collective, corporate experience. At this level, Scruton thus implies that the overwhelming ethos emanating from corporate spiritual centres is, in fact, kitsch, and that

¹⁷² Scruton, 86.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

it represents a drastic overcompensation for the loss of what truly participating in religion might mean.

The resulting enthusiasm for what some consider beautiful is triumphantly illustrated by the tears shed in “Precious Moments Chapel,” where, despite the fact that a saccharine veneer covers everything, apparently deep emotional experiences nevertheless occur. Scruton would, however, characterize the deep experience garnered from the “Precious Moments Chapel” as one among many religious organizations that attract the innovative spasms “marked by the thing which the modernists deplored—sentimentality...the desire for the glory of some heroic or transfiguring passion, without the cost of feeling it.”¹⁷⁴ A distinction is thus drawn between transfiguring passion and sentiment, but the key point is that the ennobling passions for him are understood to be what sentimentality claims for itself, which begins to expand an understanding of its attributes for contemporary research on kitsch.

Seen in this way, sentimentality is a powerful force to be reckoned with, and stands as a significant factor in the treatment of current religious practices, manifesting in ways that are largely ignored in theology as well as in the traditional and popular study of kitsch itself. Given its far-reaching importance, research on the ways in which Christian kitsch has affected material culture requires new approaches, capable of grounding a fresh critique of its current influence on faith environments. To develop this line of argumentation further, the present chapter takes a turn towards an examination of Graham Ward’s observations of the presence of kitsch at the corporate level, so as to address its elusive mutation and impression in popular culture and mass consumerism.

4.2 The Restlessness

Serving as Ward’s primary example to critique the elevation of contemporary religious kitsch to a sentimental ethos is his reference to “The Holy Land Experience,” one of two

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

“Bible-based theme park situated in Orlando between Disneyland (Florida) and Universal Studios.”¹⁷⁵ While similar to the “Precious Moments Chapel” in its intent to provide its guests with the opportunity to participate in a glorified version of Christianity, “The Holy Land Experience” prides itself on maintaining the latest electronics to recreate a total immersive experience of ancient Jerusalem. By constructing marketplaces in desert-like conditions surrounded and guided by enthusiastic, English-speaking actors and other anachronisms, Ward says the shows and gift shop booths altogether claim to continuously achieve successful transmission of an “enhanced”¹⁷⁶ experience of a historical era in a complete enrapturing of the senses. The park further boasts that the re-enactments to beautify the realism in many of its dioramas can genuinely transport participants to a time and space comparable to when Jesus and his disciples had been alive and walking.¹⁷⁷

Highly suspicious of these manufactured conditions, Ward notes that it is only possible, once immersed in this experience, to “surrender to the bombardment of the senses by signs which reproduce not the true artifacts, but the concatenation of fantasies and interpretations of what has come to constitute *for us Westerners* the ‘Holy Land’. The simulations are to be enjoyed *as* simulations, the surface *as* surface.”¹⁷⁸ Apart from these stern observations, one major problem for Ward, and the one that begins his critique, is the involuntary submission it implies to a religious experience dictated by North-American tourist companies that also earn a sizable profit from promoting a range of preconditioned expectations, satisfying the contemporary urge in the consumer supposedly to feel the sublime. The problem is, however, that the sublime on offer is in reality something rather vulgar. To situate the predicament again using his words, “[kitsch] trades in experiences of the profound that are either deflated or over-inflated; transcendence is engineered. What is aimed at is awe in the face of the spectacular;

¹⁷⁵ Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 122.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

wonder achieved through special effects. These experiences of awe and wonder are as evanescent as they are instantaneous; they are convenient and easy satisfactions.”¹⁷⁹

Under these circumstances, quick access to the sublime is literally paid for by consumers, and marketed as a means of profit by business, but what is bought and sold in this way is an access that does not intend in any regard to invoke the slightest challenging message. What is offered instead is merely the sensational.

Another part of the offence to Christian values caused by “The Holy Land Experience,” as Ward implies, is in the exaltation of this supposedly sublime feeling to what may be considered by participants as a beautiful Christian experience. His last concern points to the idea that, while the park apparently facilitates deep emotional responses, these sentimental adventures are presented in a way that denies permeation to the core of meaningful processes, like *theoria*, which was briefly explored in our findings in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics in the second chapter.

4.3 “The Church Key”

These observations, although brief, begin to illustrate Ward’s main contention concerning the contemporary kitsch experience, which he identifies as “the liquidation of religion,”¹⁸⁰ a point aiding the advancement of the central argument in this thesis. To better situate Ward’s argument within the framework of this chapter, comparisons can also be drawn here to both Scruton’s and Eagleton’s enlightening commentary on the effects of a scientific perspective on the approach to religion and theology. Ward provides a similar line of argumentation, noting that the emergence of kitsch coincided with the demythologization of theology driven by “scientific reasoning and instrumentalist thinking leading to reductive, positivist and behaviourist accounts of the way things are.”¹⁸¹ On this path, the increasing appeal of this formal, secularist and

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 124.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 129.

anthropological methodology to interpret perspectives of reality, as we have seen, distanced the valuable and intimate approach that the aesthetic paradigm offers. As modernism is known to stretch this tie and tip the scales between form and content in a representation of reality, Ward expands on this analogy by stating that, “with an ever-increasing confidence in scientific reasoning, it ‘exposed’ all forms of superstition, challenged all ignorances and set in process a demystification of the world.”¹⁸² Armed (as it thought) with the knowledge to understand many of the necessary components involved in what would facilitate a religious experience, like Buddhist enlightenment or grace and beauty in Christianity, its sublime effects could be mirrored, predicted and directed. At the global level, then, this methodology became a consumerist advantage, which has effectively contributed to the commodification of the religious experience.

According to Ward’s profound perspective, the kitsch element as exploited through corporations seeking profit through Christian theme-parks and the like is a manufactured one. Inherent in it is a “symbolic capital with a certain charismatic past [that] can give places, goods, even people a mystic charge. Those allured by this charge are not buying religion, they are not consuming the religious or being consumed by it; they are consuming the illusions or simulations of religion.”¹⁸³ Ward reassures us that, now more than ever before, these simulations are present in many areas of everyday consumerism that lie outside of a distinctively Christian discourse. The kitsch, in his perspective, is rampant throughout various platforms of telecommunications and media including, but not limited to, “shopping malls as theme parks, themed pubs, interactive museums, heritage trails, expo exhibitions, hotels and cybergames...[that] are now three dimensional and constitute the very fabric of our urban and domestic environments.”¹⁸⁴ In a way reminiscent of Holliday and Potts’ surveillance of kitsch in public and domestic practice, Ward characterizes part of the ethos of kitsch as an acquired restlessness of

¹⁸² Ibid., 126.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 133.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 124.

shifting “from one fetishized location to another”¹⁸⁵ in the search for authenticity, whether through megachurch, thrift store, or over the internet. Put another way, the restlessness is indicated by the search to freely enjoy the remnants of Christianity’s “special effects” through science and instrumentalism without directly encountering its body of theology.

And yet, Ward observes that among the dislocating presence of technological advancements to recreate religious scenarios, the “special effects” of religion are contributing to a postmodern interpretation of our immediate situation. Christian art and themes are borrowed, for example, by many corporations and businesses, as seen in his reference to a “a well-known vegetarian café and shop under the sign ‘The Eighth Day’,”¹⁸⁶ or, perhaps more immediately and ironically, in a local restaurant in London, Ontario called “The Church Key,” boasting its presence next to St. Paul’s Cathedral and St. Peter’s Basilica.¹⁸⁷ Each contemporary example edges on a kitsch experience, and in some sense inevitably so, as Ward contends that these are efforts to rehabilitate and “unlock” the unique perspectives that religion can bring to ground the experience of an estranged secular culture.

In that culture lamenting the loss of *dynamis*, which is phasing through the corporate sentimentality of kitsch, some of Ward’s final comments begin to reveal how the idea of the religious “is lending a certain magical, mystical polish to contemporary forms of customized transcendence.... Religion does not live in and of itself any more—it lives in commercial business, gothic and sci-fi fantasy, in health clubs, themed bars and architectural design, among happy-hour drinkers, tattooists, ecologists and cyberpunks.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 131

¹⁸⁷ In a crass example of this particular phenomenon is the quirky *SchweineMuseum*, located in Stuttgart, Germany. It is a repurposed slaughterhouse turned into a public museum that showcases its adoration for pigs (which are considered lucky in German culture). There are festivals and weddings held at this museum, which boasts its tagline of “*Kunst, Kultur und Kitsch.*” As one particular intersection of art, culture, and kitsch, the *SchweineMuseum* is a contemporary example of Ward’s observation of liquidation. For more research into this cultural site, please visit www.schweinemuseum.de

Religion has become a special effect, inseparably bound to an entertainment value.”¹⁸⁸ Ward’s lament, it would seem, can be seen in the gradual equation of the entertainment industry with the intrinsic, kenotic value inherent within the religious element. The conflation of these two industries, Church and religious Broadway, has thereby displaced what in essence may be provoking or in bad taste to the religious experience, where both may be seen as undeniably “magical.” Blurring the line between these two attributes, the kitsch ethos also conflates “experience-hungry consumerism and religious simulation...related to the figure of the cannibal as the feared and awed consumer.”¹⁸⁹

Ward’s concluding statements can be interpreted in two ways. One can, on the one hand, take them as an advisory against such amalgamation, or on the other hand, one might think an acceptance of the trend in which these two industries are coalescing to be inevitable. However, as the latter predicts its termination through semantic satiation, the former better represents what Ward identifies as crucial in the preservation of the religious affiliation: the ideology pertaining to “resistant identities.”¹⁹⁰ Both cases, he suggests, inevitably fall prey to kitsch sensibility as its auxiliary function guards against “the profound uncertainties, insecurities and indeterminacies of postmodern living. The religious is used to help simulate euphoria in transporting events. Both cultural roles are different aspects of religion as fetish—caught up in the complex economies of displaced desire (sexual and consumerist); desire without a proper object.”¹⁹¹ Again, Ward is extending the conversation of the kitsch esprit into a shared ethos but begins to suggest that psychoanalysis might enable subsequent theological interpretations of this contemporary phenomenon.

¹⁸⁸ Ward, 133.

¹⁸⁹ Ward, 124-125.

¹⁹⁰ Ward, 133.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

In light of his conclusions, one might say that the factor of kitsch within Christian practice in late Capitalist culture most importantly reveals a religious dependence on the surrounding materialist culture. The kitsch aspect, giving it the benefit of the doubt, manifests to help assert religious identities and, in some ways, tends towards tolerating religious difference on the surface level, since it would seem that popular taste demands such “products.” The primary problem, for Ward, is that the influx of so many devotional objects and the conversations they incite at this level are mainly superficial, undemanding, and largely conspicuous. By the latter, Ward means that the effect that these echo chambers of “special effects” generates tends to result in an insatiable desire or fixation, linked with the obsession to consume as many of these effects as possible so as to enjoy such religious consumption to an excessive degree. By referring to these indulgences as “fetishisms of faith,”¹⁹² Ward points us to the implication that, instead of the constant gratification received in these restless, vulgar processes, the construction of another logic is needed. This is in part to recognize and keep the “marketable” aspects of kitsch from completely inundating the Christian value system.¹⁹³

Using language commonly used with discussions of the subconscious, particularly in his treatment of these “fetishisms of faith,” Ward points to the need for the guidance of psychoanalytic theory in our thinking about the intersection of theology and cultural politics, so as to better address the patterns of kitsch that appear through the phases of modernity. Distinctly shaping the direction of this central argument, however, is the work of the Slovenian “academic [punk] rock star,” Slavoj Žižek, whose interest in the ideology involved with Christian spirituality can serve to rehabilitate what Ward and others before him see as having been grotesquely compromised by kitsch commercialism. For Žižek inversely suggests that it is only through a recalibration of the theology behind “Christian materialism” that the radical “resistant identities” found in the Christian tradition can rediscover their truly countercultural voice. With this antithetical frame in

¹⁹² Ward, 124

¹⁹³ Ward, “In the daylight forever?”, 162-166.

mind, the controversy brought on by the “liquidation of religion,” through the implosion of Christian values amid consumerist marketing, may very cautiously be seen as a necessary component in the attempt to fully retrieve the authentic religious vision that has been all but shattered by Industrialist kitsch.

4.4 “Deep Spirituality” as “Suspended Belief”

Situating Žižek’s radical approach for the present chapter, we are reminded of Olalquiaga’s view of kitsch as the failure to seamlessly reconstruct the coveted perspective of authenticity. This project is re-interpreted and advanced by Ward, who maintains that the current function of the religious aesthetic is continuously doctored for the “re-enchantment of the world in which religion provides a symbolic capital, empty of content and yet preeminently consumable—like caffeine-free, sugar-free Coke.”¹⁹⁴

Ward’s sweeping metaphor here is borrowed from Žižek’s analysis, which highlights such innovative and immensely popular capitalistic trends. This will be a helpful idea to keep in view in the remaining analysis of contemporary kitsch sensibility. Kitsch, including Christian kitsch, results at a basic level from a corporate strategy to increase the rate of consumption of particular goods by decreasing the risk involved with consuming those goods.

To extend the implications of this claim further, Žižek’s account states that “we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol.... And the list goes on...up to today’s tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness.”¹⁹⁵ On the surface, the incessant manufacturing of these surrogate goods acts as an artificial way to provide consumers with certain health advantages, given the rather adverse, “death-

¹⁹⁴ Ward, *True Religion*, 138.

¹⁹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 97.

driven” direction in which excessive consumerism otherwise tends.¹⁹⁶ In this way, however, the inauthentic has become normative. Both Žižek and Ward observe, furthermore, that this ideological pattern of hyper-consumption, albeit estranged from its defining, destructive and smiting properties, manages to reach as far as the treatment of religion, and most notably manifests in popular Christian sensibility. The spectacle cultivated, for example, by many religious tourist industries, like “The Holy Land Experience” and the “Precious Moments Chapel,” lies not only within the “realities” they manufacture and sell, but rather in the dizzying, sentimental nebulas which these giant corporations actively sponsor, butchered for manageable enjoyment and maximum profit, and effectively make religiously normative.

It is Žižek, heavily influenced by Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis, who takes our argument concerning Christian kitsch past simply decrying its expression in the modern paradigm, by showing how the approach to the faith practices of Christianity itself have changed to adapt to these present, secular methods of mass consumerism. “When it comes to religion,” Žižek observes:

we no longer “really believe” today, we just follow (some) religious rituals and mores as part of respect for the “lifestyle” of the community to which we belong (nonbelieving Jews obeying Kosher rules ‘out of respect for tradition,’ etc.). “I don’t really believe in it, it’s just part of my culture” effectively seems to be the predominant mode of the disavowed/displaced belief characteristic of our times. What is a cultural lifestyle, if not the fact that, although we don’t believe in Santa Claus, there is a Christmas tree in every house, and even in public spaces, every December? Perhaps, then, the “nonfundamentalist” notion of “culture” as distinguished from “real” religion, art, and so on, *is* in its very core the name for the field of disowned/impersonal beliefs—“culture” is the name for all those things we practice without really believing in them, without “taking them seriously.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 53.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 7.

One particular habit guiding this convoluted trend is in what he calls “deep spirituality,”¹⁹⁸ by which Žižek means “the ability to open oneself to a certain unheard-of dimension, of the way our openness to radical Otherness allows us to adopt a specific ethical stance, to experience a shattering form of enjoyment.”¹⁹⁹ In his perspective, this “deep spirituality” often ends up representing an ambiguous cipher for “I don’t know what I believe,”²⁰⁰ but is nonetheless our characteristic evasion in finding spirituality in “direct materialism.”²⁰¹ The aversion may be explained by reference to those patterns that relate to kitsch, which we have seen in this thesis can mean devotional engagement with any (liturgical) object of theological contemplation.²⁰² Kitsch not only distorts the relationship between subject and object, but it necessarily generates anxieties and hesitations concerning embodying faith authentically. The problem is that, over time, modern, sentimental approaches have been projected onto Christian materialism, producing, like Žižek’s “coffee without caffeine,” something that many and perhaps most people must recognize at some point as not being quite right.

Žižek refers to this contemporary nuance as “‘suspended’ belief, a belief that can thrive only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret.”²⁰³ What belief has become, in a world of kitsch religion, is precisely that. At best, of course, it has tended to represent merely a perverse simulation of “ultimate reality,” to use Tillich’s term. Restoring a more authentic vision, as Žižek sees things, would involve “capturing the

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 5

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1992), 42.

²⁰³ Žižek, 6.

imagination of the masses, and thus serving the purposes of moral and political order.”²⁰⁴ This, however, implies a theological renewal that, among other things, includes a rediscovery of the traditional ways of aesthetic contemplation. In other words, Žižek urges that current theology take up the task of the reconsideration of the value of interaction with the material world, with a view to the promotion of a more honest and integral material Christianity that more effectively evokes its Incarnational theology—in response to what we have witnessed by way of its ideological wreckage brought on by industrialist technology and capitalist manipulation.

Returning to these traditional approaches to faith-based practices, worship, and art, Žižek insists that clarification of “the ‘vulgar’ question ‘Do you really believe or not?’ matters—more than ever, perhaps.”²⁰⁵ For Žižek, indeed, directly answering this question takes us close to uncovering the “subversive kernel”²⁰⁶ inherent in the articulation of a Pauline Christianity, by which Žižek primarily means a theology of the cross. Yet, how one comes to this answer is related also to a re-examination of what Ward’s “resistant identities” might mean for the future composition and relevance of Christian theology, given how pervasively these “deeply spiritual” identities are routinely folded into superficial, corporate gloss. Anticipating the direction of a new theological aesthetic that protests against the aggrandizement of the kitsch element will necessarily, therefore, involve the articulation of questions pertaining to “belief.” An examination of Žižek’s radical views on “faith” at the most pivotal of Christian moments is accordingly the subject of the next section.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 6.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 6.

4.5 The Authentic Gesture of Christianity

The revitalization of the materialist perspective, and its reintroduction into Christian practice, is for Žižek closely related to faith itself. This point, however, as he puts it, is primarily demonstrated by the,

radical ambiguity of the term ‘the faith of Jesus Christ,’ which can be read as subjective or objective genitive: it can be either ‘the faith *of* Christ” or “the faith / of us, believers / *in* Christ.” Either we are redeemed because of Christ’s pure faith, or we are redeemed by our faith in Christ, if and insofar as we believe in him. Perhaps there is a way to read the two meanings together: what we are called to believe is not Christ’s divinity as such but, rather, his faith, his sinless purity. What Christianity proposes is the figure of Christ as our *subject supposed to believe*: in our ordinary lives, we never truly believe, but we can at least have the consolation that there is One who truly believes.... The final twist here, however, is that on the Cross, Christ himself has to suspend his belief momentarily. So maybe, at a deeper level, Christ is, rather, our (believers’) *subject supposed NOT to believe*: it is not our belief we transpose onto others, but, rather, our disbelief itself.²⁰⁷

In this sharp analysis, Žižek provides us the reminder that our faith in Christ, as the conventional token of Christian membership, is intimately related to doubt. Thus the sheer misrepresentation of Christian values in kitsch, the fact that faith has become something that, as we have seen, “a private obscene secret,” becomes a central resource for the articulation of a subversively theological (and beautiful) alternative.

Adam Kotsko’s commentary of this uniquely Žižekian analysis of the cry of dereliction, at the pivotal moment of Christian expression, explains that the revival of this perspective is necessary “to its founding moment as ‘the religion of atheism’, the religion in which even God is an atheist.”²⁰⁸ Representing one of the most arresting themes shared across the Gospels, and marking the depth of Christ’s kenosis in the Epistles, this is a point that Kotsko, as he puts it, represents “the authentic gesture of Christianity [in] acknowledging

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 101-102.

²⁰⁸ Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 99.

the non-existence of the big Other.”²⁰⁹ The kenosis is considered by Balthasar to be the apex of beauty, in which the Word of God is spoken definitively in the silence of death, demonstrated by the very relinquishing of content (*Gehalt*) with the destruction of form (*Gestalt*). Žižek’s analysis of the theme is similarly startling. “When Christ dies,” Žižek concludes, “what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in ‘Father, why hast thou forsaken me?’: the hope that there *is* a Father who has abandoned me. The ‘Holy Spirit’ is the community deprived of its support in the big Other.”²¹⁰ And as such, the *dynamis* is the active and upraising attempt to directly reproduce the beauty demonstrated by the cross, instigated by the doubt of Christ at his most beautiful moment. The important aspect from this Žižekian interpretation of the *imitatio Christi*, “the true communion with Christ...in Christ’s doubt and disbelief,”²¹¹ is that the means to produce *dynamis* is not entirely lost, as is claimed by the lamenting perspective surrounding much commentary on Christian kitsch.

A theological aesthetics with this methodology in mind begins to suggest ways in which to repel the appeal and prominence of kitsch in Christian culture. “Resistant identities,” Žižek maintains, can be rehabilitated through a renewed materialist approach to Christianity, as “it is possible today to redeem this core...only in the gesture of abandoning the shell of its institutional organization (and, even more so, of its specific religious experience). The gap here is irreducible: either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form, but loses the essence.”²¹²

The potential problems this generates for Christian theology are, needless to say, considerable, but as a starting point for discussion, Žižek’s suggestion has much to offer in the articulation of quality for a new theological aesthetics. Žižek’s point is not the

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Žižek, 171.

²¹¹ Žižek, 102.

²¹² Žižek, 171.

complete obliteration of Christianity, as he genuinely finds that Christian ideology is inherently motivational in a cogent expression of faith through the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Žižek sees the institutional structures surrounding corporate Christian religion as an obstruction and a large and vulgar distraction from what is truly of theological and religious interest. And it is the rediscovery of this response, surely, that ought to be central to the project of any contemporary Christian theology.

Standing against this movement, however, are the cultural forces of Christian kitsch, allied with pervasive strands in late capitalism. When the jarring implications of industrialist sentimentality begin to be recognized for what they are, however, then something else might begin to take the place of kitsch. Kotsko maintains that, were such a day to come, Christians might experience “the new bond of distinctively Christian love—a love that is necessarily ‘materialist’ [Such love] does not treat the Christian experience as a dispensable preface, but maintains the materialist bond of love opened up by Christ’s death on the cross as its motivating force.”²¹³ While this insight may not be viable as the final point in the renewal of all things theological, it is, I suggest, valuable at least as a way to guide us to that goal, providing a unique perspective on the radical claim addressed to our world by the Christian gospel—which is anything but kitsch.

²¹³ Kotsko, 100.

Chapter 5

5 Conclusion

As already emphasized, the primary goal of this thesis has been to outline the foundations for the construction of an alternate methodology, or at the very least to offer resources for a renewed perspective, by which to trace and critique the phenomenon of kitsch in modern Christian practice. In the argument of the previous chapter, the claim was encountered that kitsch has elevated into a non-materialist experience of Christianity in late capitalism. The unreality of this is further reflected by the reference Žižek makes to not directly believing in God, but to instead consuming the rather oblique experience of believing in belief in God. This may provide a new way to understand the importance of Tillich's insights in light of today's corporate spirituality, which, as we have seen, also represents an estrangement of the Church from God. To proclaim a distinctly Christian idea of beauty so as to show provocative angles on "ultimate reality," in response to both modern and contemporary forms of kitsch, requires that we clarify the need for misgivings about the 'beautifying' spirituality manufactured by corporate strategists. This, for Žižek, would be the "subversive kernel" extracted from the Christian tradition to counter consumerist marketing techniques in late capitalism, which can assist in the formation of those "resistant identities" that has been said to anchor the body of the Church.

Another main strand of argument promoted by this thesis has been advocacy for an interdisciplinary approach to the articulation of a theological aesthetics. Recognizing "bad taste" or kitsch in the current Christian environment as a particular form of anti-religious thought requires entering into conversation with an array of disciplines, not limited to cultural studies. Quality, for example, is one significant component in Balthasar's theological aesthetics; it is, however, generally a component that is only naively understood, and yet it is an increasingly important, and highly debatable, issue arising in the cultural productions of late capitalism. Further studies of this potentially religious element may assist in the approach to Christianity through and beyond the Information Age, where quality is a notion that is taken for granted in our immediate

technology, our shopping malls, and in our Churches. Balthasar's work suggests, however, that our excessive usage of the term is a poor guarantor of genuine "beauty."

The forces that govern the consensus of quality, and therefore the "good and noble" religious experience, have blurred the line between what may be considered in "bad taste" and what may be truly provoking and inspiring. It is becoming more of a common sentiment now that provoking art collapses into kitsch, and vice versa. As we have seen, *The Plastic Religion* raises these questions, as does Aaron Rosen's survey of offensive religious art that includes the "Holy-book bomb," among other instalments, like a life-sized wax statue of the Pope struck by a meteorite. A more thorough understanding of these two concepts in the approach to a theological aesthetics, and in the attempt to reveal "ultimate reality," may prove to be advantageous.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is appeal to "religious tokenism," identified by Grady Smith in his critique of country music that contains explicit references to Christianity. Even as a country music connoisseur, Smith considers many of the large-scale festivals in which these lyrics are sung to emit a sentimentality that closely correlates to our critique of Christian kitsch. "Its purpose," he finds, "is not to challenge or expose listeners to anything interesting, but instead to herald the lives they are already living and reframe those lives as significant, even spiritual paths. But that makes for boring and calculated music that limits the public's imagination for the extreme places that both faith and the rejection of faith can take people. And bad music is a shame."²¹⁴

Žižek would surely agree, though the critique of Christian sentimentality in music on which I would hang this conclusion comes from a rather more grandiose context, namely, his reference to Nietzsche's criticisms of Wagner's *Parsifal*. In Žižek's account, Nietzsche correctly "diagnosed Wagner's decadence as consisting in a combination of asceticism and excessive morbid excitation: the excitation is false, artificial, morbid,

²¹⁴ Grady Smith, "Country's Jesus-and-partying crew cheapen both the faith and the music," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jan/13/country-music-jesus-partying-christianity?CMP=share_btn_fb (accessed January 23, 2016)

hysterical, and the ensuing peace is also a fake, that of an almost medical tranquilization.”²¹⁵ For Žižek, the key question that Nietzsche posed of Wagner is still relevant, however, since in Nietzsche’s treatment, “the ultimate fake of Christianity is that it sustains its official message of inner peace and redemption by morbid corpse of Christ. The very term passion here is revealing in its ambiguity: passion as suffering, passion as passion—as if the only thing that can arouse passion is the sick spectacle of passive suffering. The key question, of course, is: can Saint Paul be reduced to [a] mixture of morbid excitation and ascetic renunciation?”²¹⁶ Žižek’s answer to the latter question, of course, is “No,” but to do justice to this would require further study of his timely book, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, as well as later substantial writings, like *On Belief*, that further strengthen a theory of dialectical materialism in Christian practice and ethics. These would not only augment our current study on Christian kitsch, but also potentially open up new ways of articulating a positive and fresh approach to a theological aesthetics.

In moving along this trajectory, this thesis poses questions hugely relevant to contemporary theology—relevant to the disturbing relationship between kitsch and liturgy,²¹⁷ or to the role of kitsch in the political arena as well²¹⁸—concerning quality, beauty, and the fate of Christianity in the modern West. Throughout, the importance of kitsch as a genuinely theological problem has been emphasized. While constantly seen as a derogatory term, our analysis of kitsch nonetheless has generated fruitful discussion and pushed the boundaries to force us to contemplate what is ultimately theological. In other words, as “anti-art,”²¹⁹ kitsch has operated as a foil to indicate something of what

²¹⁵ Žižek, 97.

²¹⁶ Žižek, 97-98.

²¹⁷ Johan Cilliers, “The unveiling of life: liturgy and the lure of kitsch,” *Hts* 66, no. 2 (January 1, 2010): 1-5.

²¹⁸ Catherine Lugg, *Kitsch: From Education to Public Policy*, (New York: Falmer Press, 1999).

²¹⁹ McDannell, 165.

Christian beauty may essentially mean, and the challenges associated with its pronouncement.

Religious scholar, Robin Jensen, advises us to “look and look again,”²²⁰ around at our surroundings, for the ways in which materialism influences the articulation of Christian faith. And there are ways of educating people about how they may go about this, too, by reference to Žižek once more, who identifies three different psychological paradigms of “gazing” that can shape observer’s way of thinking about art.²²¹ While most of it out there may be kitsch, all of these methods at the end willingly show our ceaseless struggle to find a space to articulate pure beauty somewhere between form (*Gestalt*) and content (*Gehalt*). This, however, is surely material for future study.

²²⁰ Robin M. Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and the Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 152.

²²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 107-122.

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