
PART I

Trajectories of Religious and Aesthetic Interpretations

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Religious Experience as Aesthetic Experience

Abstract The starting point of this article is the observation that some definitions of aesthetic experience are based on metaphors from religion or ritual theory. One notable example is Erika Fischer-Lichte's definition of aesthetic experience as liminal experience. She divides experiences into aesthetic, where the journey itself is the goal, and non-aesthetic, where the experience is a route to faith and belief. Fischer-Lichte's theory is described here so as to reflect on how religious experience in general could be categorised as part of a broader concept of aesthetic experience. Furthermore, this paper describes how existing concepts of aesthetic and religious experience have many structural and functional parallels, and how distinguishing between aesthetic and religious experience becomes particularly difficult if art is seen as a transcendent principle, i.e. one that is barely distinguishable from the bases of monotheistic theologies. This view of art becomes relevant when the sublime is discussed as a feature of objects.

Aesthetic experience can be stimulated as much by the real lived environment as in connection with works of the traditional arts. It can be related to shapes and colours as much as to people and landscapes, to situations of joy as much as to mathematical conclusions. Even within narrower fields of art, conversations about aesthetic experience focus on the actual *impact* of works or events of art rather than on their concepts and forms.¹ Descriptions of aesthetic experiences may differ depending on one's social and cultural background.² This freedom and openness has led to a situation where the term itself needs to be clarified.

Current research, for example at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, looks for somatic reactions and patterns in the reception of poetical texts or music. It builds on the question of who likes what, and why?³ And it uses methods from psychology or neuroscience in addition to working with the language. When it comes to an analysis of the "functions of aesthetic practices and preferences for individuals and societies," different cultural, situational, and historical backgrounds are a factor.⁴

In this article I will point out that many of the scholars who looked for definitions and descriptions of aesthetic experience used metaphors that come from theological thinking and have also been used to describe religious experience. Religious writers have seen experiences in connection with music or nature as a means to an end, arguing that such intense feelings could only be caused by an extramundane reality symbolised by aesthetic or natural forms. The following interpretation of Erika Fischer-Lichte's definition of aesthetic experience as liminal experience tests the opposite hypothesis. According to her definition, most kinds of religious experience can easily be described as aesthetic experience as long as there is no belief in the existence of an extramundane reality.

1 See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetische Erfahrung: Das Semiotische und das Performative* (Tübingen: Francke, 2001) as well as Joachim Küpper and Christoph Menke, "Einleitung," in *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung*, eds. Joachim Küpper and Christoph Menke (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

2 See Rolf Eberfeld and Günter Wohlfart, eds., *Komparative Ästhetik. Künste und ästhetische Erfahrungen in Asien und Europa* (Cologne: Edition Chora, 2000). The meaning of the notion of aesthetics (from ancient Greek *aesthesis*) differs quite significantly even within Europe. The argumentation used here works for many cultures, but mainly within monotheistic cultures that also have a tradition of discussing art or aesthetic experience. This is not the case in some African cultures for example, which do not distinguish between art and craft. See Koku G. Nonoa, "Christoph Schlingensiefel's Theatre and the African Opera Village. Rediscovery (of African artistic practices)," in *Art of Wagnis: Christoph Schlingensiefel's Crossing of Wagner and Africa*, eds. Fabian Lehmann, Nadine Siebert, and Ulf Vierke (Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2017), 172.

3 Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, accessed June 6, 2017, <https://www.aesthetics.mpg.de/en.html>.

4 Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics.

Aesthetic Experience as Liminal Experience

Theories of aesthetic and religious experience are similar especially when they describe transcendent, or transformative processes. In order to further narrow down aesthetic experience, and based on research on rituals, Fischer-Lichte arrives at a definition of aesthetic experience as liminal experience accompanied by a mostly temporary transformation of the spectator.⁵ For her, aesthetic experience can be understood as liminal experience based on basic anthropological conditions. Within these conditions, the person experiences a state of constant transformation. In performances, the participants experience themselves more intensively and create themselves anew in shorter intervals than in real life.⁶ As Fischer-Lichte explains, the term “liminal experience” was first used by Victor Turner in 1969 in his research on the processes of transformation that are caused by rituals. Turner refers to Arnold van Gennep’s study *Les rites de passage* (1909), which describes rituals as liminal experiences with a highly symbolic charge. Van Gennep distinguishes three phases of *rites de passage*, or transitional rites: firstly, the separation of everyday life; secondly, the phase of transformation; and thirdly, the phase of incorporation that leads to a new role in society. In the second phase—the liminal phase—the participant enters a state between the applicable or valid norms and rules that enable him or her to create completely new and partly disturbing experiences.⁷ Turner takes van Gennep’s term “liminal experience” and applies it to a delicate “betwixt and between” state in which normative orders are rearranged and signs are interpreted with new meanings.⁸ Ursula Rao and Klaus-Peter Köpping further refine this theory. They point out the similarity between eventful rituals and performances or artistic events. They further add that the liminal phase can lead to a transformation not only of the social status of the person involved but also to a new interpretation of symbols and a change in that person’s perception of reality “in all possible respects.”⁹ Building on Rao, Köpping, and Fischer-Lichte, Matthias Warstat has made a distinction between liminal experiences in ritual and aesthetic processes. He suggests that in aesthetic processes

5 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 190.

6 See Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Ästhetische Erfahrung als Schwellenerfahrung,” in *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung*, eds. Joachim Küpper, and Christoph Menke (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003); Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 205.

7 See Fischer-Lichte, “Ästhetische Erfahrung als Schwellenerfahrung,” 139. Based on fundamental experiences of mythological heroes, a similar model can be seen in Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

8 See Fischer-Lichte, “Ästhetische Erfahrung als Schwellenerfahrung,” 139.

9 Klaus-Peter Köpping and Ursula Rao, “Die ‘performative Wende’: Leben—Ritual—Theater,” in *Im Rausch des Rituals: Gestaltung und Transformation der Wirklichkeit in körperlicher Performanz*, eds. Klaus-Peter Köpping and Ursula Rao (Hamburg: LIT, 2000), 10.

unlike in traditional transitional rituals, liminal experiences are possible even if participants do not reach an irreversible change of status.¹⁰ In both situations though, the liminal phase transforms participants' perception of reality and extends their field of experience as much as their system of meaning and sense.¹¹ The limits of a participant's reality or previous field of experience becomes a threshold. Even more than the comparison with rituals, the metaphor of the threshold signifies a close proximity to religious-philosophical considerations. In theology, as well as in the movements of aesthetic experience, transgression plays a key role. Both the liminal phase and the transgression of a border mark parallels between theological thinking and the aesthetics of performances, of which aesthetic experience as liminal experience is a part. They find their equivalents in concepts of transcendence and of transformation.¹²

Defining aesthetic experience as liminal experience is here based on the theory of rituals that are a part of most religions. Other theories use different religious metaphors. Many contemporary definitions of aesthetic experience draw upon categories that originate in a spectrum of religious forms. Martin Seel, for example, broadly defines aesthetic experience as appearance or manifestation (*Erscheinen*),¹³ comparable to a secular form of an epiphany. The terms epiphany or presence are also used by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in a similar context.¹⁴

Erika Fischer-Lichte presents the concept of liminal experience as a definitional criterion, drawing on the notion within ritual theory of the "liminal" state—the feeling of intoxication or the ecstasy of being "betwixt and between" established norms¹⁵ that arises through participation in rituals and resembles the sensation of being "outside oneself" in mystical awakening experiences. If aesthetic experience is interpreted as having religious significance, the recipient interprets the extension of his or her field of experience as though it offered a connection to transcendence as a separate reality because the borders of his or her reality have been expanded. Furthermore, the intensity of aesthetic feelings gives the recipient a reason to assume its divine character.

10 Matthias Warstat, "Ritual," in *Metzler-Lexikon Theatertheorie*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005), 277.

11 Köpping and Rao: "Die 'performative Wende,'" 10; see Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 175.

12 In dualist theological approaches, transcendence refers—as seen for example in the work of Karl Jaspers—to an outer-worldly reality. If a recipient who tends toward religiosity interprets his or her aesthetic experience as a religious one, then he or she will interpret the expansion of the realm of experience as though it offers a connection to transcendence, as though the limits of his or her reality could move beyond into some higher place or otherworldliness. The recipient would also attribute the intensity of his or her experience to an extrasensory or transcendental influence.

13 Martin Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens* (Munich: Hanser, 2000).

14 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Diesseits der Hermeneutik—die Produktion von Präsenz* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2004).

15 Fischer-Lichte, "Ästhetische Erfahrung als Schwellenerfahrung," 158.

As has become clear, the moment aesthetic experiences are defined as liminal experiences with a transformative effect or response, they begin to have similarities with religious experiences such as awakening or revelation. Aesthetic experiences can be characterised by those forms of expansion and extension that prompt religious interpretations. We can therefore determine a structural kinship between specific forms of aesthetic and religious experience. In turn, this makes it even more difficult to find differences between them. In distinguishing aesthetic from non-aesthetic experience, Fischer-Lichte writes:

While I will label those liminal experiences aesthetic which make the journey the goal, the liminal experiences which use the journey to reach "another" goal are non-aesthetic.¹⁶

This is a very useful definition. While religious experiences or religious art are a route to faith and belief, aesthetic experience is there for the sake of the pleasure or intensity it evokes. But separating aesthetic liminal experiences from religious liminal experiences is still a difficult proposition. Unexpected awakening experiences, for example, have no goal, but they do have an enduring outcome in that they effect a transformation of a non-believer into a believer. The predominantly unexpected transformation is credited as being the objective or purpose only through the religious interpretation of faith. Indeed, Fischer-Lichte introduces a second criterion of difference:

It depends on the individual's perception whether they are concentrating on the liminal state into which their perception has led them or whether they are experiencing it as a transition to a specific goal.¹⁷

This suggests that experiences that occur in conjunction with artistic events, in that moment where religious interpretation is present, no longer constitute aesthetic experience because the experience in that moment is in the service of faith.

Furthermore, that aesthetic experiences can generally be interpreted as an epiphany or revelation or as a mystic, holistic experience of awakening is a statement about its quality. It clarifies the level of intensity that aesthetic experiences can have. Religious interpretations therefore affirm the definition of aesthetic experience as liminal experience. They affirm the exceptional state that can appear in connection with art-events and generates the search for metaphysical or supernatural explanations.

Beyond this, two forms of religious interpretations of aesthetic experience can be distinguished that minimise the difference between aesthetic

¹⁶ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 199.

¹⁷ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 200.

and non-aesthetic. The religious interpretation of aesthetic experience is either a mediator or a substitute for faith. Understanding the state of liminality as the aim is very similar to understanding art as a substitute for religion. Thus, a point is reached at which experiences that are interpreted as religious can be referred to as aesthetic because the religious interpretations of aesthetic experiences become aesthetic functions, objectives, or purposes.

Artistic, liturgical, and ritual acts can cause a permanent transformation of a person's worldview and of what they believe.¹⁸ With knowledge of the aesthetic cause of this transformation, a personal art-religion can be the result of aesthetic liminal experience. The permanent character is realised either in a belief which draws impetus from aesthetic experiences, or in the social expression of an art-religion, as seen with the Romantic composer Richard Wagner and his work.

Just as individual, religious belief can lead to an ascetic way of life, a belief in the theatre or in music and the aesthetic ideal is often linked to excessive practice, rehearsal, or other artistic endeavours. A belief in autonomous art that can be distinguished from the end-in-itself of aesthetic experience becomes dangerous if it compromises or encroaches upon life. It is here that performances of self-harm become reminiscent of medieval practices of penitence or repentance.¹⁹

Drawing on Jan Mukařovský, Fischer-Lichte asserts that art distinguishes itself "from other objects to which an aesthetic function can be attributed through the dominance of the aesthetic function: while in other fields the aesthetic function might be subordinate to other functions [. . .], in a work of art these other functions are subordinate to the aesthetic function."²⁰ Aesthetic pleasure can thus be perceived variously as salvation, truth, meaning, intensity, togetherness, or as a sacred atmosphere. Moreover, the prioritising of aesthetic pleasure can become a transcendent principle and can fulfil the function of a reduction of contingency. If the absolute priority of the individual artistic work is based on a repeated experience of meaningfulness, the variety of possible ways to live and to behave is reduced. This function of transcendent principles will be explained in the following discussion.

18 In this way, performativity theory has also found its way into Catholic religious pedagogy. See Thomas Meurer, "Performative Religionspädagogik: Größe und Grenze eines Trends," in *Herder Korrespondenz—Monatshefte für Gesellschaft und Religion* 63 (2009), 375, as well as *Performative Religionsdidaktik: Religionsästhetik—Lernorte—Unterrichtspraxis*, eds. Thomas Leonhard and Silke Klie (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008).

19 Aesthetic experience in self-harm performances has also been traced back to the sublime. See Jaša Drnovšek, *Masochismus zwischen Erhabenem und Performativem* (Paderborn: Fink, 2014); Rosemarie Brucher, *Subjektermächtigung und Naturunterwerfung: Künstlerische Selbstverletzung im Zeichen von Kants Ästhetik des Erhabenen* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013).

20 Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetische Erfahrung: Das Semiotische und das Performative*, 54. (Translation: Kate Davison)

Equivalences of Transcendence

Aesthetic and religious experiences whose descriptions closely resemble one another and only differ when connected with broader meanings and functions are transgressions of everyday life. Their aesthetic interpretations require a concept of art, and their religious interpretations require a concept of God or transcendence. In the dualistic approach of philosopher Karl Jaspers, for example, transcendence refers to an extramundane reality.²¹ It becomes apparent that the abstract noun “art,” as a romantic and historically unbound item, is no more explicable than religious concepts of the afterlife. The assumption of art as a unified concept becomes—according to Immanuel Kant—a transcendent principle of aesthetic thinking. In his introduction to the transcendental dialectic, Kant writes:

All principles [of pure reason], the application of which is entirely confined within the limits of possible experience, we shall call *immanent*; those, on the contrary, which tend to transgress those limits, *transcendent*.²²

Kant assumes that our reason can only work if it establishes transcendent principles to provide a framework. Those transcendent principles can, for example, refer to the beginning or the unity of the entity. Metaphysical assumptions or beliefs can form the transcendent principles of our thinking.

Some concepts of aesthetic experience are therefore based on the transcendent principle of the existence of art. Aesthetic thinking is bound to that principle, and thus experiences that could be called religious in other cultural contexts can be subordinated. This hierarchy is actually visible in contemporary aesthetic theories. For example, Gumbrecht, as mentioned above, chooses religious metaphors to describe the presence of texts.

Additionally, in many forms of art, aesthetic equivalences of transcendence that are influenced by religio-philosophical thinking can be observed. This is particularly true in Romanticism where they are distinctive of the form. For example, the musical harmonic progression that is typical of the Romantic style of composing can create the illusion of transcendence. In the visual arts, abstraction can perform this function or meaning, and in literary texts the endless web of references between single motifs can give a reader the impression of experiencing an aesthetic equivalence of transcendence.

21 Karl Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz* (Munich: Piper, 1984).

22 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason: In Commemoration of the Centenary of its First Publication*, trans. Friedrich Max Mueller (2nd revised ed., New York, 1922), 295f. <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1442>>, accessed December 20, 2014.

SACRED ATMOSPHERES AS AESTHETIC EFFECTS OF PERFORMANCES

It will have become clear that religiously interpreted experiences can theoretically be included in the system of aesthetics, especially if art has become a transcendent principle. In the following section I want to discuss an example in practice that leads us in a slightly different direction. The German performance artist Christoph Schlingensiefel has demonstrated in different contexts how sacred atmospheres have their origins in strategies of aesthetic effect. The large procession that featured in his staging of *Unsterblichkeit kann töten. Sterben lernen! Herr Anderson stirbt in 60 Minuten* (Immortality can kill: Learn to die! Mr. Anderson dies in 60 minutes) in Zurich, Switzerland, in December 2009 showed that the combination of sensual stimuli, music, and movement can cause an ecstatic effect. The second act was the performance of a ritual procession.²³ The whole audience followed the actors through the historic city of Zurich, with the lead actor carrying a cross at the front in the manner of Jesus. At a station of the cross, which was located at the Kunsthau museum in Zurich, this same Jesus-actor played a mystic having an epiphany while two other actors playing Mary and a priest stood next to him. The audience watched in tense silence. They were part of an atmosphere of mystical inwardness. After a while the priest shouted: "Hey, that is really good! That should be done in an installation!" The priest's reference to an installation reminded the rapt audience that this was a performance and part of a theatre evening. The audience members were made aware of the fact that they had transcended the usual modes of perception.

Schlingensiefel's performance was the result of his real-life quest for faith in the face of life-threatening cancer. In this situation he demonstrated how religious experiences are often the result of an aesthetic performance. With this performance he emphasised his belief in art while simultaneously questioning it.

STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL SIMILARITIES OF AESTHETIC AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

After having shown how religious experience can be called aesthetic and how it can be created performatively, I want to describe further the structural and functional similarities of both terms. A religious service can be experienced as an artistic event just as much as an evening of musical theatre. In both cases, the entrances and exits of specially attired participants

23 Sabine Felbecker, *Die Prozession. Historische und systematische Untersuchungen zu einer liturgischen Ausdruckshandlung* (Altenberge: Oros, 1995), 449. In the re-enactment of the Passion of Christ procession, the play serves to create a "tangible realization [of Christ] in the present." For this reason, such processions are "fully equipped with numerous props and accoutrements that elevate their optical appeal" (ibid., 450, 447).

are stage-managed and the music has a particular expressive power that resonates throughout the carefully designed space of a church. Similarly, the liminal state after a concert can be perceived as fulfilling a beneficial or therapeutic function in and of itself, or alternatively, as a strengthening of one's faith. The institutional framework which normally determines whether performances are to be categorised as artistic or non-artistic can be subverted through personal experience. Performances within the institutional framework of religious organisations like the church can be purely aesthetic, just as the most autonomous art can be interpreted as religious, thereby acquiring a purpose external to its institution. Whether to describe an experience as aesthetic or religious—be it music, the perception of a room, a journey through nature, or witnessing a ritual—is an individual decision that is determined by the disposition or attitude of the recipient.

Both perspectives have been described in eighteenth-century writings. To explain religion both as a perception of the universe and as a feeling, Friedrich Schleiermacher adopted the language of the theory of perception as it was developed in eighteenth-century aesthetic writing, while his contemporary Novalis, with a background of similarly pietistic socialisation, describes poetic ideas using religious metaphors.²⁴

Differences and overlaps between art and religion manifest depending on interpretation, framing, and the attribution of function. This means that the attributions of 'religious' or 'aesthetic' contain implicit statements about cultural belonging. Just as the labelling of one's own experience as religious can be indicative of social belonging or belief, the reflection and verbalisation of an experience as aesthetic can be indicative of a culturally specific educational and experiential background. It is mainly through the interpretation of experiences and sensations that their ordering within conceptual traditions takes place.

Furthermore, experiences that become empirical knowledge are generally processual and transient. In particular, descriptions of the aesthetic experience of art objects as being more passive in character than participating in performances often approximate the traditional descriptions of religious experience as being oriented towards concepts of revelation or epiphany. In addition, building on Novalis's likening of belief

24 "Der Sinn für Poesie hat viel mit dem Sinn für Mystizismus gemein. Er ist der Sinn für das Eigentümliche, Personelle, Unbekannte, Geheimnisvolle, zu Offenbarende, das Notwendigzufällige. Er stellt das Undarstellbare dar. Er sieht das Unsichtbare, fühlt das Unfühlbare etc." Novalis, "Fragmente und Studien 1799–1800," in *Schriften*, vol. 3, eds. Paul Kluckhohn et al. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960), 685. In his book *Die Vielfalt religiöser Erfahrung: Eine Studie über die menschliche Natur*, trans. Eilert Herms and Christian Stahlhurt (Frankfurt/ Main: Insel, 1997), William James uses language in a way that has many similarities with the poetic language of his brother, the writer Henry James. See also the series of three collected volumes edited by Wolfgang Braungart, Gotthard Fuchs, and Manfred Koch, *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrungen der Jahrhundertwenden*, 3 vols., (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997, 1998, 2000).

and imagination,²⁵ parallels can be drawn between the active processes of myth creation and performative faith or belief practices. The similarity between what is called either religious or aesthetic experience not only refers to perceptive behaviour but also to deliberate actions. Just as allowing oneself to enter the fictive world of a novel, an opera, a film, or a game requires a conscious decision, resolution and decision may also lie at the basis of religious experiences when, for example, deliberate rituals take place.

Aesthetic experience within the intensity of a liminal experience can be knowledge-creating or it can re-order our moral values. If experiences such as delight in the beautiful and the creation of communities or the formation of a feeling of connectedness to another person are interpreted as potent aesthetic experiences, then they can also be seen as stabilizing the system of art in the same way that religiously interpreted experiences consolidate the system of religion. Beyond such internally systemic functions of aesthetic experience, it is common within diverse cultures to place aesthetic experiences at the service of economic, political, moral, religious, or therapeutic systems.

The Sublime

According to Rudolf Otto, the sacred, as distinct from the profane, can be experienced as *fascinosum* or *tremendum*, that is, as religious rapture or reverential awe.²⁶ These conceptual pairs have similarities with the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime in the aesthetic theories of Edmund Burke and Kant.²⁷ Likewise, both the pleasant and painful emotions typical of Christian contexts found their way into the poetic texts of the eighteenth century in order to strengthen the effect of literature, as seen for instance in Klopstock's *Über die heilige Poesie* (An Introduction on Divine Poetry) in his *Messias*. Whether experiences are referred to as religious or as aesthetic is a result of personal classifications that are rooted in culturally and historically specific understandings of religion and art.

The interleaving of aesthetic and religious experience is especially obvious in relation to the differing concepts of the sublime. In common usage

25 Novalis, "Das Allgemeine Broullion," in *Schriften*, vol. 3, 421: "Vernunft ist directer Poët—direct productive Imag[ination]—*Glauben* ist indirecter Poët—indirect prod[uktive] Imag[ination]."

26 Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau: Trewendt & Granier, 1917).

27 Otto establishes the relationship to the sublime himself; Otto, *Das Heilige*, 54. John Dewey's theory of *Art as Experience* is also built upon the notion of an absolute: "Either our experiences [. . .] have ultimate meaning and worth, and the 'Absolute' is only the most adequate possible construing of this meaning; or else, having it not, they are not available to give content to the Absolute"; Josiah Royce: *The World and the Individual*" [1900], in John Dewey, *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 2 (Carbondale: Siu Press, 1976), 137.

the term 'sublime' means that which is overwhelming or large. According to Kant an object itself cannot be sublime. Only the mind can reach the sublime when it realises its own powerlessness to understand what it sees but can nevertheless sense a certain pleasure. Moments of being overwhelmed or full of admiration, in which the viewer experiences the limits of his or her capacity can be caused by unusual size, expanse, special formations, by the impression of perfection, or by meaningful utterances. If mind and judgement compensate for what sensual experience and imagination initially can't conceive, the viewer will feel elevated. Again, drawing on Kant, it is not the object that is sublime, but rather the mood of the mind.²⁸

After the concept of the sublime had already been applied to questions of the elevation of the soul by way of language and stylistic means in the writing of Pseudo-Longinos,²⁹ it became a basic concept in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century aesthetics. Since the concept was revisited in the twentieth century, an understanding oriented towards negative theology is striking in that it refers to Plato but also to some passages in Longinos.³⁰ The first comprehensive engagement with the sublime as Kant described it can be seen in the work of Theodor W. Adorno, who also took up the term art-religion (*Kunstreligion*).³¹ For Adorno, the sublime is a pioneer of an aesthetics of the non-representable: "The legacy of the sublime is unassuaged negativity, as stark and illusionless as was once promised by the semblance of the sublime."³² Since Adorno's development of the concept, and in contrast to Kant's understanding of the perceiving and thinking person, the sublime has become a quality of aesthetic objects, which accords with the concepts of negative theology.³³ This turn to an art-religious understanding of the sublime in the twentieth century is the extension of a Romantic tradition.³⁴

While religious devotion or endlessness were two isolated examples among many other ways to experience the sublime in the years around

28 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Mathews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §26.

29 James A. Arieti, and John M. Crosssett, trans., *Longinus. On the Sublime*, (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985).

30 Christine Pries, "Einleitung," in *Das Erhabene: Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Größenwahn*, ed. Christine Pries (Weinheim: VCH Verlagsgesellschaft, 1989), 3; Birgit Recki, "Das Erhabene," in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 2, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 1408.

31 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

32 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 199.

33 Alois Halbmayr, ed., *Negative Theologie heute? Zum aktuellen Stellenwert einer umstrittenen Tradition* (Freiburg: Herder, 2008).

34 The notion of the sublime as the non-tangible element that characterises the poetic can already be seen in the work of Romantic thinker Giacomo Leopardi, "Zibaldone di pensieri," in *Tutte le opere*, ed. Francesco Flora, vol. 4 (Milan: Mondadori, 1938), 1300, which is quoted in Jörg Heiningen, "Erhaben," in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe* vol. 2, ed. Karlheinz Barck et al. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001), 299.

1800, Jean-François Lyotard developed a primarily mystic understanding of the sublime that also comes from Romanticism.³⁵ Unlike Adorno, he does not link his discussion to musical virtuosity and literary forms but rather to the idea of colour-field painting in Barnett Newman's *The Sublime is Now*, or the abstract expressionist paintings of Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, Clyfford Still, Ad Reinhardt, or Jackson Pollock. Lyotard sees the abstraction of the pictures as the "negative presentation"³⁶ of the infinite.

Negative presentation is the sign of the presence of the absolute, and it is or can only make a sign of being absent from the forms of the presentable. Thus, the absolute remains unrepresentable; no given is subsumable under its concept. But the imagination can nonetheless signal its presence, in an almost insane mirage, through the emptiness it discovers beyond its capacity to comprehend. This gesture must be understood reflexively, however, for it is only through its sensation that the thought that imagines can be made aware of this presence without presentation.³⁷

Lyotard describes what we could call aesthetic experiences of the sublime as being situated somewhere between imagining and understanding, between the presentation and the impression of emptiness. He also points out that the process of imagining and producing the presence of the absolute or the sublime can be rationally observed, but only as a reaction to what is being sensed. In his interpretation of Lyotard's text, Wolfgang Iser emphasises the feeling of that which is beyond comprehension ("das Gefühl des nicht mehr Faßbaren.")³⁸ Following Lyotard, he highlights how in art something akin to the ban on images in the Old Testament is revived, not because it portrays God in the abstract but because the inarticulability of that which is represented is reminiscent of religious traditions. Iconoclasm becomes a metaphor, whereas the sublime is associated with the sensitive, subtle, unconscious, and transcendent.³⁹ Referring to Kant's notion of the feeling of the sublime, Christine Pries, who has translated Lyotard into German, describes a paradox between pleasure and pain, insanity and enthusiasm. She sees the sublime as a paradox itself.⁴⁰ That

35 Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

36 Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment*, § 23–29, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 150.

37 Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 152.

38 Wolfgang Iser, "Die Geburt der postmodernen Philosophie aus dem Geist der modernen Kunst," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 97 (1990), 22.

39 Iser, "Die Geburt der postmodernen Philosophie," 22.

40 Pries, "Einleitung," 10f. See also, *Ästhetik im Widerstreit: Interventionen zum Werk von Jean-François Lyotard*, eds. Wolfgang Iser and Christine Pries (Weinheim: VCH Acta Humaniora, 1991). In light of Lyotard's emphasis on the idea that the "inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in another word, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens" see Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, 1993). Christine Pries in her interpretation of Lyotard highlights that it takes similar shape in process-heavy performative art in the lead-up to every performance. The sublime, she argues,

said, it is not surprising that the structural analogy between the aesthetics of the sublime and the theories of negative theology has been increasingly interpreted along theological lines.⁴¹ It is no coincidence, for example, that in discussing the sublime in contemporary literature, Torsten Hoffmann, who highlights the aesthetic and poetic implications of the concept of the sublime, singles out the work of authors like Peter Handke, Christoph Ransmeyer, and Botho Strauß,⁴² whose narratives can also be characterised by way of the mystical or mythical forms of art-religion.

Against the background outlined here, the re-interpretation and re-deployment of the concept of the sublime became part of art-religious concepts in contemporary theoretical aesthetics. Here, it is above all the concept of aura that is significant. Whereas for Kant the concept of the sublime sees the spectator reflected in the freedom of his or her own power of judgement, against which is set the overcoming of a feeling of powerlessness, Lyotard emphasises the limits of human perception in light of the sublime. The sublime is for him, therefore, a feature of art objects. Following up on considerations of an independent existence and the power of art, he even speaks of the “anaesthetizing effect” of art.⁴³ In a successful interplay between reason, sensory perception, and affect, it derives from the feeling that characterises the aesthetic—and originally, precisely the aesthetic of the sublime—of being sedated and of being powerless to grasp anything in either a sensory or spiritual sense. Insofar as Lyotard uses the concept of the sublime to describe the “contradictory feeling through which the indeterminate is enunciated and withdrawn,”⁴⁴ his clarification of the term comes very close to the art-religious concept of aura that is connected to Walter Benjamin’s famous definition “We define the aura [. . .] as the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”⁴⁵

is not a metaphysics of transcendence; it is not to be vertically but rather horizontally understood, and it gains its critical function from the suggestion or insinuation of a range of possibilities (Pries, “Einleitung,” 28).

- 41 Christian Pöpperl, *Auf der Schwelle—Ästhetik des Erhabenen und negative Theologie: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, Immanuel Kant und Jean-François Lyotard* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2007); Reinhard Hoeps, *Das Gefühl des Erhabenen und die Herrlichkeit Gottes: Studien zur Beziehung von philosophischer und theologischer Ästhetik* (Würzburg: Echter, 1989); Maurice Tuchmann, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).
- 42 Torsten Hoffmann, *Konfigurationen des Erhabenen: Zur Produktivität einer ästhetischen Kategorie in der Literatur des ausgehenden 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006).
- 43 Jean-François Lyotard, *L’inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 200, quoted in Welsch, “Die Geburt der postmodernen Philosophie,” 22. The German translation of Lyotard’s text appeared shortly before the publication of Welsch’s work.
- 44 Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 106.
- 45 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (Third Version), in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 255. This is strengthened in Katharina Bahlmann, *Können Kunstwerke ein Antlitz haben?* (Vienna: Passagen, 2008).

These two different concepts of the sublime are linked to the two different ways of thinking outlined above. Aura can be the feature of an object or it can be an aesthetic experience in the combination of an overwhelming sensual impression and its rational observation. It can be a word for the description of an equivalence of transcendence in art or nature and it can also describe an experience that can be interpreted either in a frame of religion or in a frame of aesthetics.

Conclusion

What people with specific backgrounds or beliefs call a religious experience can generally be interpreted equally as aesthetic. While Schleiermacher and Otto represent two examples of a long theological tradition in which aesthetic experience is a mediator to a belief in God, the aesthetic concepts of theorists like Kant or Fischer-Lichte demonstrate that it is possible to reverse the hierarchy in order to see the liminal experience or experience of the sublime as an end in itself.

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