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# CHRISTIANITY, ART AND TRANSFORMATION<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*In this article, two papers, previously published in A Theological Odyssey. My Life in Writing (2014a), both based on Christianity, Art and Transformation (2001), are conflated. The first is a paper on "Christianity and Transformation" presented at a symposium on "Christianity and the Arts" at Andover – Newton Theological Seminary, Boston, 26 October, 1999. The second is a paper on "Art, Culture and Transformation" presented at the Conference on Arts and Reconciliation in Civil Society, University of Pretoria, 14-20 March 2005.*

*... some of the greatest works of art in the Western tradition have discerned and enabled us to see the beauty of God revealed on the cross (and) in the manger (De Gruchy 2001:123).*

*Theological aesthetics does not encourage flight from the world but assumes Christian participation in God's mission to transform the world (De Gruchy 2001:129).*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

**My interest in Christianity, art and theological aesthetics crept upon me slowly, and then suddenly took me into a new research project**



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1 This article was originally published as a chapter (pp. 113-131) in *A Theological Odyssey. My Life in Writing* (2014a), published, as part of the Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology, by Sun Press, Stellenbosch. For his writings on Christianity, art and transformation, Cf. De Gruchy (2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2008, 2014). (EDITOR)

in the 1990s. This developed in several directions. The first was related to the role of art in the struggle against apartheid and its potential for enabling social transformation in the new South Africa. The second was the history of the relationship between Christianity and the arts through the centuries as a prelude to understanding how this story informs our appreciation of the role of art today. The third had to do with theological aesthetics, a subject that provided the foundations for my endeavours but had never before been on my horizon. The major outcome of my new interest was *Christianity, Art and Transformation* which I wrote in 1998 while on sabbatical in Cambridge and Durham in England.

## 2. CHRISTIANITY, THEOLOGY AND VISUAL ART

Karl Rahner once wrote that “theology cannot be complete until it appropriates” the non-verbal

arts as an integral moment of itself and its own life, until the arts become an intrinsic moment of theology itself (1982:24).

If we reduce theology to words, we unjustifiably limit “the capacity of the arts to be used by God in his revelation” (Rahner 1982:24). Of course, the visual arts have played a significant albeit contested role in the history of Christianity. At various times, this has led to theological reflection on what is liturgically and pedagogically appropriate art. Such theological reflection is not, however, the same as doing theology in dialogue with the visual arts, whether such works are located in the sanctuary or not, or whether they are used for the purpose of spiritual formation and education. Nor is it engaging in theological aesthetics, the theological discipline that explores the meaning and significance of the arts in relation to Christian faith. Doing theological aesthetics is not a substitute for studying the visual arts as such, but it places them within an interpretative framework in terms of Christian tradition, other theological disciplines and the history and theory of art.

Most contemporary theologians engaged with the visual arts comment on their role both within the life of the church and in society. For them, the visual arts, whether as products of faith or despair, the work of believers or non-believers, or intended for the sanctuary, home, gallery or public square, have the potential to awaken sensibility to reality in all its tragic ugliness and transforming beauty. They enhance life by providing pleasure, a major purpose of the arts, but they also help us see in fresh and sometimes startling ways what would otherwise be hidden from sight. They help define and renew our humanity.

The term “visual arts” may be understood to include architecture, film and related media, as well as installations, sculpture and painting. My focus is on the graphic arts, but much of what I say applies to them all. There are further distinctions we can make with regard to the visual arts, such as those between “fine”, “high”, “popular”, “naïve”, “folk” and “primitive” art. Such distinctions are often used to distinguish the “classics” of a particular art tradition from other works, but they should not be used to denigrate one form in favour of another. There has been a tendency for those theologians interested in the visual arts in the West to focus their attention primarily on “fine” or “high” art. Yet it is often “popular” art that expresses the faith and doubts, hopes and fears of people. Perhaps a more useful distinction is between good art, art that has integrity, and art which is banal and mediocre. Another distinction often drawn is between “religious”, “spiritual” and “secular” art. This, too, has some value, but it is also problematic, for each word is loaded, with the boundaries between them not always clear. In speaking of theology and the visual arts, I do not only have in mind those works of art that have an obviously religious theme, though many great works of art, as in the Sistine Chapel or the paintings of Rembrandt, certainly do.

## 2.1 In historical perspective

Despite the strictures against idolatry in the Old Testament, descriptions regarding the building and furnishing of the Temple in Jerusalem indicate considerable aesthetic interest. Representations of God were forbidden, but there was plenty within the Temple to attest to the importance of the visual. Likewise, examples of visual art, some of it influenced by Graeco-Roman culture, have been discovered in synagogues of post-exilic Judaism, demonstrating that such art was not deemed to break the first commandment but was considered appropriate adornment. There are also examples of pre-Constantinian Christian visual art, notably in the Roman catacombs. But art in the life of the church only began to flourish once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Just as Christianity interacted with and appropriated the thought forms of Hellenistic culture, so it borrowed from the art of classical Rome and Greece in visually depicting its faith. The dangers in doing so were evident to theologians and bishops, who regularly warned against idolatry. But this did not prevent Christians from expressing their faith in visual symbols, or painting images of biblical stories and themes, of Jesus, Mary, the martyrs and saints. As the church became more established, there was a proliferation of iconography that informed and sustained a largely illiterate popular piety. Icons became a “fifth gospel”, communicating the

gospel narrative and inspiring devotion. The proliferation of icons was such that by the eighth century theological, ecclesiastical and political forces converged in a controversy about them that threatened to tear the church apart in the Eastern Roman Empire.

The Iconoclastic Controversy was a defining moment in the history of Christianity and in the development of visual art in the Western world. All sides agreed that there should be no visual representations of God, for that would be idolatry. But the iconoclasts, generally associated with the Emperor's court, rejected the use of any image (ikon) in the sanctuary. On the other side, the iconophiles, largely centred in the monasteries, insisted that while much visual art was inappropriate, icons of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints, were essential to the life and worship of the church. The iconophiles won the day, hence the fundamental role which icons play in the liturgical and spiritual life of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches.

The Iconoclastic Controversy highlights two conflicting theologies in the history of the relationship between Christianity and the visual arts. The iconoclasts represent an anti-idolatry trajectory, also powerfully expressed within Islam which arose at the time of the Iconoclastic Controversy and threatened Byzantium. Iconoclasts not only insist that any attempt to visually represent God distorts the truth and dishonours God (the iconophiles would have agreed), but the depiction of any human form is sacrilege. The counter-argument is premised on the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ, God has accommodated the divine nature within the constraints of the human for the sake of the redemption of the world. The Word, which became flesh, was seen, touched and handled (John 1:1), and it remains appropriate to experience the incarnate Word through all the senses. Hence icons prayerfully and faithfully produced have the capacity for communicating the truth and becoming windows of transcendence.

Although the outcome of the Iconoclastic Controversy settled matters in the East, it was different in the Western church where the issues continued to surface within the Roman Catholic Church and later the churches of the Protestant Reformation. Luther was more interested in music than in visual art, about which he was largely indifferent. Calvin recognised the value of the visual arts as a source of pleasure, but would not permit such art in the sanctuary. Protestants have therefore tended to be much more cautious with regard to the visual arts than Roman Catholics, and were sometimes severely iconoclastic. But the Council of Trent (1545-63) was also sensitive to the dangers of visual art, laying down rules for what was appropriate. While encouraging the arts, the Council sought to control the proliferation

of art in churches during the Renaissance, although many of its patrons were popes, cardinals and bishops.

There were several important historical junctures in the relationship between Christianity and the visual arts subsequent to the Protestant Reformation, such as during the Baroque period and the nineteenth century. The relationship was also affected by the global expansion of Christianity into new contexts, leading to visual expressions of Christian faith reflecting other than European cultures. The ecumenical and liturgical movements in the twentieth century also stimulated renewed interest in the role of the arts in the life of the church. Whereas artists had previously had reason to feel alienated from the church, there was change in attitudes on both sides of the divide. This led to a flourishing of the use of visual arts in the churches, demonstrating the irrepressible desire of many Christians to express their faith through art. At the same time, there was a growing interest amongst some theologians in the visual arts more generally, and a rediscovery of the importance of theological aesthetics.

## 2.2 Twentieth century theology and art

Few English-speaking theologians, especially Protestants, were interested or engaged in our subject at the beginning of the twentieth century. One exception was P.T. Forsyth (1848-1921), a Scottish Congregationalist, who early on in his career as a theological professor in London recognised the theological and religious significance of the visual arts. In a series of lectures entitled *Religion in Recent Art*, first published in 1887, Forsyth discussed the pre-Raphaelite movement in England, and later dealt more broadly with the arts in *Christ on Parnassus* (1911). As a Reformed theologian, Forsyth's interest was not visual art in the sanctuary, but its necessity for religion and life, insisting that "no religion can be true religion if it does not encourage art" (Forsyth 1905:145).

But theological interest only really began to flourish after the Second World War. Paul Tillich (1886-1965), a German Lutheran chaplain during the First World War who had personally experienced its horror in the trenches on the Western Front, found respite "by devoting his leisure to the study of art" (Adams 1965:66). As a result, art not only became a passion for him but also a source of divine disclosure, revealing the nature of the human condition and providing intimations of ultimate reality. But whereas Forsyth discovered this in the pre-Raphaelites, for Tillich it was the work of the Expressionists that provided a prophetic critique of bourgeois society, revealing its emptiness, ugliness and guilt, and at the same time breaking open the possibility of redemption and hope.

Tillich's emphasis was on the prophetic role of the artist rather than on the artist as agent of grace. But the latter was predominant for George Bell, Anglican bishop of Chichester in the mid-twentieth century, whose contribution to relating theology and the church to culture and the visual arts in England was immense. With the Incarnation as his point of departure, Bell emphasised the material character of Christianity and called on the churches to enter into a partnership with artists, recognising their potential ministry and God-given vocation (Bell 1940:57). Bell recognised that he was taking a risk, given the fact that so many artists were non-believers and his own conviction that no art in the sanctuary should contradict the gospel. Yet for Bell, all true art had its own integrity and functioned in a sacramental way. There is, he insisted, a common bond between all who believe "in justice and truth, mercy and love, in art and poetry and music", for these are indestructible (Bell 1940:146).

Many parish churches, local congregations, and especially cathedrals carry on Bell's legacy in emphasising the importance of visual arts and encouraging artists to contribute to the life of the church. But it was in the United States that the dialogue between theology and the visual arts made most headway within the academy, and it did so not least because of the presence and influence of Tillich who had fled Nazism in 1939 and immigrated to New York. Indicative of this development was a symposium of essays on *Christian Faith and the Contemporary Arts*, published in 1957, and re-published three times within the next five years. In the opening essay, Nathan Scott commented that the current cultural experience required theologians "to enter into a new and hitherto largely untried collaboration with the whole community of the modern arts" (Scott 1957:28).

One of those influenced by Tillich was John Dillenberger, who later testified that it was Tillich alone of all the major theologians to whom he was introduced as a student who "seemed to ... involve the full range of humanity's sensibilities" in his theology. Dillenberger's *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (1986), remains a significant contribution to our subject. Although by the 1980s the situation had improved, it was still Dillenberger's contention that theologians "by and large do not yet know the extent to which their own disciplines may be enriched, if not transformed, by a deeper exposure to the arts, including the visual arts" (Dillenberger 1986:248).

Dillenberger identified four main approaches to the subject. The first he associated with Barth who upheld Calvin's resistance to the use of the visual arts in the life of the church, even though Barth had a particular love for the music of Mozart and a more general appreciation of the visual

arts. Yet for me, the fact that Barth and others in the Reformed tradition for whom the dangers of idolatry and the pre-eminence of “the Word” generally preclude the role of the visual in doing theology, does not mean that they provide no resources that can be appropriated for that task.<sup>2</sup>

The second approach Dillenberger associated with Tillich and others who affirmed the relationship between art and theology, regarding culture as a source for doing theology. But Tillich’s “dazzling theological interpretations” of modern art were “grounded in theological seeing without faithfulness to the artworks themselves” and therefore remained “unconvincing to critics and art historians” (Dillenberger 1986:221). Yet while it is true that theology should not impose itself on the arts, theologians cannot escape their own presuppositions and experience. A more serious criticism of Tillich and others who have done theology in dialogue with the visual arts is that their interest was almost totally confined to the “fine” and “high” arts.

A third approach regards the arts as models for theological work. Amongst those whom Dillenberger identifies in this category are the Catholic theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner and David Tracy. For Dillenberger, neither Von Balthasar nor Rahner, despite their commitment to the task, provide much help in actually relating theology and the visual arts – a view I do not share. Yet, at the same time Tracy’s recognition of visual art as “affirming and stretching our sensibilities” in doing theology, certainly provides a helpful model (Dillenberger 1986:226-227).

Of all the theologians of the twentieth century, Von Balthasar has put theological aesthetics firmly on the agenda with his multi-volume *The Glory of the Lord* (1982). In doing so, he has brought back beauty into theological discourse, something seriously neglected in theology, philosophical aesthetics and in art criticism since the nineteenth century. There is a point to the criticism that his approach chiefly serves his apologetic purpose that art finds its true meaning and goal within the framework of Christian faith and specifically the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, Von Balthasar provides us with a wealth of insight derived from his immense knowledge of European history and culture, as well as his theological acumen so firmly rooted in the Incarnational theology of the patristic period.

If Von Balthasar’s intent was apologetic, so too was that of the neo-Calvinist Dutch scholar H.R. Rookmaaker, whose *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* has become a classic within more conservative

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2 See De Gruchy (2001:97-168).

evangelical circles. A professor of the history of art at the Free University in Amsterdam, Rookmaaker maintained that developments within the visual arts in the early decades of the twentieth century inaugurated a “new era in cultural history” (Rookmaaker 1994:131). But while modern art perceived and portrayed the death of Western culture, it failed in its analysis of human nature and its destiny from a Christian perspective. A convert to Christianity during the Second World War, Rookmaaker used his extensive knowledge of modern art to interpret the meaning of the gospel, and to suggest how art could be renewed and become a source of renewal through its encounter with evangelical Christianity.

Rookmaaker’s influence was widespread within evangelical circles where, during the latter decades of the twentieth century there was a remarkable revival of interest in the arts. His legacy is especially reflected within a circle of neo-Calvinist artists and scholars in the United States. Pre-eminent amongst them are two philosophers, Nicholas Wolterstorff, formerly of Yale University, and the Canadian Calvin G. Seerveld. Both recognise the need to overcome the gap between “high” and “popular” art, and to recover the role of art as integral to what it means to be human and to live life fully as a Christian. Hence, for Wolterstorff, to understand art it is necessary to understand life and to recognise works of art “as instruments and objects of action” (Wolterstorff 1980:69). There is a necessity to recover a Christian aesthetic and appreciation for the arts, not just for enjoyment, contemplation and delight, but also as a source of glorifying God and for the sake of the just transformation of society.

So let me return to Dillenberger’s typology, and specifically to his fourth set of theological models which he labels “alternative”, within which he includes liberation and feminists theologies. But in doing so, I would argue that the description “alternative” is not helpful, for it conveys a Eurocentric set of assumptions about both art and theology. If we are to do justice to our theme, we have to take into account the plurality of theological approaches, many of them located beyond the boundaries of Western theology and art and their respective canons.

## 2.3 Theology engaging art

Theologians, as Rahner tells us, need to make the visual arts intrinsic to their task. This means developing an informed knowledge in the same way as we do of the humanities and social sciences, and some of the natural sciences as well. This has important implications for theological education and the development of curricula. It also means engaging in dialogue with artists and exploring issues of mutual concern both for themselves and for the wider society. Theologians and artists may well recognise that their



roles are not dissimilar, but often mutually reinforcing, especially as agents of prophetic critique and healing (Haynes 1997).

Then there is the need to encourage artistic creativity and aesthetic sensitivity in the life of the church. In doing this, those of us who are theologians will discover that our own work is enriched. We begin to see things with new eyes and therefore see things differently. But the engagement with visual art and artists is also important for artists. Theologians bring to the discussion an understanding of transcendence, of the world and of human nature in all its perversity and potential that can critically inform the conversation. Without prescription or presumption, we need to engage artists in dialogue around those issues that threaten contemporary society.

This task has a particular urgency in our age in which there has been an explosion of image production, not least through the power of advertising in a consumerist global economy. And once connections are made between art and the struggle for justice, between ugliness and poverty, beauty and redemption, between awakening creativity, renewal and transformation, between embodiment, representation and identity, a new dynamism is generated for doing theology. Let me comment on some of the areas that need mutual exploration.

*Embodiment* is a key category for both theology and the visual arts and as such a point of connection between them and therefore between theologians, painters, architects and sculptors. We experience the vision of the visual artist through material embodiment; likewise, we experience the reality of God through God's embodiment in Christ, through our experience of "the body of Christ", "the body of the other", through whom Christ encounters us, and therefore through our own bodies, our senses.

Exploring what embodiment means for theology and the church in dialogue with the visual arts provides new perspectives and insights concerning the meaning and significance of the Incarnation, the sacramental character of reality, as well as the agonies and ecstasies of human life. For embodiment is not simply about the material, but also about its relation to transcendence; it is about the creative Spirit who shapes and gives life and form to the material.

Theologically speaking, we celebrate the body against a false dualism of soul versus body; but Christianity refuses to make the body a fetish, as in much contemporary culture which denies the creative and redemptive Spirit that gives life to the body. Embodiment is ambiguous for this very reason. Nowhere is this more evident than in our recognition of the body's limitations and inevitable decay. This ambiguity raises significant

questions that need to be addressed. For example: How do we pursue the importance of the visual or of any other sense in a world where so many people have lost the use of their sensual faculties?

The question of *representation* is equally critical for visual artists and us theologians. For how and by whom is “the other” to be represented? Consider the way in which images are abused in the media in representing “the other”, or “the good”, whether in the service of consumerism or national and sectarian interests. Or the way in which “the other” has generally been represented in colonial literature and art, in theological treatises and polemics. False representation, as in propaganda, is an abuse of the visual, its use to dehumanise and subjugate. False representation is idolatry, distorting the reality of God and the image of God in humanity and creation. The prohibition of the production of false images of God in the Decalogue is the premise for not abusing “the other” and the creation. How, then, is “the Other” and the “Wholly Other” to be represented without distortion, and therefore in a way that does not place the divine under our control?

All art, like all theology, is located within a particular cultural setting, and paradoxically its universal significance derives as much from that fact as from anything else. Faith, as Howes reminds us, “lives from the *particular*, and (that) it was with great insight that the Iconophiles in the eighth and ninth centuries defended depiction of the Incarnate One in art, against a false notion of transcendence” (Howes 1997:682). The iconophiles of old insisted that the Incarnation gave legitimacy to the production of images of Christ and the saints, provided that they represented the truth perceived by faith and tradition. Even though our canvas must necessarily be broader than the Byzantine, the problem of relating image production to truth remains. How do we represent Christ today amidst the clash of competing images that seek to claim our allegiance? How do we represent Christ today in relation to the “religious” or “secular” other? But even more, how is Christ represented to us by “the other”, and by the artist who expresses the anguish and hope of those who are oppressed? Theologians who engage the visual arts should do so in ways that enable us to see reality from the perspective of those who suffer, are oppressed, or are different in other ways from us.

The visual arts serve as antennae of culture, enabling us to come to a greater appreciation of the many cultures around the world that increasingly interact with each other. One significant side effect of the missionary expansion of Christianity into many different cultural contexts has been a flowering of good religious art that expresses the biblical narrative as well as the meaning of faith, reconciliation, and hope in the idiom of those

cultures. This is an important resource for theological reflection in its attempt to relate to cultural and religious pluralism today, providing as it does a window of opportunity for theologians to explore the riches of other cultural and religious traditions through their art works.

Awakened aesthetic sensibility assumes the development of *good taste* and an *awareness of beauty*. This is not a subject that is normally talked about by theologians, nor do preachers recognise that bad taste, as Frank Burch Brown reminds us, is sinful (Brown 1989:136). Such a notion might appear outlandish and elitist, and yet on reflection bad taste is a moral liability whereas good taste, properly understood, generates human community and helps us express the glory of God (Brown 1989:146). The formation of good taste does not mean simply developing an appreciation for “fine” in the Western tradition, but an appreciation for good art rather than the banal and mediocre. This brings me to the importance of developing an adequate theological aesthetics as an integral element in doing theology in dialogue with the visual arts.

One major point of connection that needs exploration in this regard is the notion of beauty and its recovery as a key category for theology and the arts. Until fairly recently, beauty has been a much neglected topic in aesthetics, though in previous times it was central. But beauty has recovered its position as a fundamental category in aesthetics. At the same time, largely through the influence of Von Balthasar, it has re-entered theological discourse. This has helped us discern the true character of beauty as distinct from its parodies. True beauty attracts us in ways that transform and humanise, providing intimations of transcendence within the material and mundane. False beauty seduces us in ways that dehumanise and destroy. True beauty is inseparably connected to both goodness and truth. Without beauty, truth and goodness lose their power to attract and therefore redeem, but without ethical self-transcendence, without goodness and truth, beauty becomes seductive and destructive. Beauty as conveyed through the arts can become a way of encountering God (Viladesau 2000).

Much modern art has been a protest against seductive beauty, and for this reason has employed the ugly as a way to shock us into recognition of its banality and danger. But ugliness in itself has no power to redeem and renew life and humanity; it may be good as a tool for protest but it is not helpful for healing. This brings us to the paradox of the cross and its significance as the point of departure for understanding the nature of beauty as redemptive. If the crucified Christ, an image without beauty and one associated with criminality and death, is at the centre of Christian theology, and if for the eyes of faith, this event has become redemptive and

therefore beautiful, then our understanding of beauty has to be radically revised. For while beauty gives pleasure, and must always be understood to do so, it is not pleasure oblivious to the plight and suffering of the world but rather a pleasure that evokes passion. This is the key issue on which theological aesthetics, with its focus on beauty critically retrieved, and the visual arts, with their concern to express reality, whether seen through the eyes of faith or not, converge.

## 2.4 Creativity, art and transformation

There are many people in all societies whose poverty keeps them in bondage to ugly environments which crush their creativity just as they crush their bodies, and whose lack of resources and education prevents them from developing an appreciation for art. At the same time, through discovering their creative abilities, people are enabled to rise above their circumstances and contribute not only to their own well-being but also to the healing of their communities. Art can contribute to social liberation and transformation, something demonstrated in the struggle against apartheid and in helping people respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, helping them recover dignity and humanity.

The development of aesthetic awareness and creativity in the life of the church also enhances its life, witness and renewal. The renewal of the church is always the work of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit is the Spirit of creativity, calling forth gifts within the life of the people of God and enabling their use. From this perspective, creativity and the awakening of aesthetic sensibility begin to emerge in times when the church is open to the Spirit and to the renewal that the Spirit brings. This is not the same as an awakening of interest in the arts. Rather, it is the awakening of creativity and aesthetic awareness amongst the people of God in such a way that the various art forms are appreciated and allowed to develop organically within the life of the church. In this way, the visual arts become an integral part of the worship and mission of the church, having a liturgical coherency and theological significance that is otherwise not possible. But all this has to do with more than producing art for the church's own immediate benefit; it is also about producing Christian artists whose work will contribute to the well-being of society (see Brand and Chaplin 1999). Such considerations have considerable implications for theologians engaged with the visual arts, and for the theological formation of ministers, priests and the church as a whole.

The most obvious form of visual art that relates to the church is architecture, for it is through its embodiment in brick and mortar, concrete, steel and glass, amidst the other structures of village, town and city, that

the church gives visible evidence of its presence. The church building is a mediating structure between the liturgy and the public square. Of course, the church as the “people of God” is visibly present in many other ways in the community and society, for the church as such is not the building in which the church as “people of God” worship. Yet, there is a connection between the two, for the building within which the liturgy occurs provides both the internal space for that event and the external face which represents what is taking place and what it means. *How* the building *represents* the church as a living, witnessing community to the world outside, is part of what the church is attempting to say to the world about its reason for existence. In view of this, the dialogue between theology and the visual arts must at least include architects and may well need to start with them.

But equally important, if not more so, is the creation of the space within which the liturgy is to take place and in which, to go one step further, other appropriate works of art may be situated. This brings us to the question: what visual art is appropriate within the sanctuary? Again, this is a critical issue for discussion between the church’s theologians and artists, for what might be appropriate in the public square is not always so within the sanctuary.<sup>3</sup> The church building is not meant to be an art gallery or museum, but a place of worship, and one that should reflect the gospel that is preached as much through the words and music as through works of art.

I turn now to the public role of art. This relates to what I wrote earlier about doing theology in public. Artists and theologians enter into dialogue in public as citizens and human beings who are concerned about the world in which we live. I have said much already about how the churches participated in the struggle against apartheid and the transition to democracy, and how some of us did theology at that time (De Gruchy 2014a:1-112). But what about the role played by artists, especially visual artists, and what insights do we gain from what they did?

### 3. THEOLOGY AND ART IN THE PUBLIC ARENA

Many great artists, I think immediately of Goya and Picasso, understand their role as a public vocation. For them, art is not primarily a source of pleasure, more often it is an expression of pain, but it is a way of engaging with social reality in the hope that somehow their contribution may make a difference to the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in South Africa where the creative and performing arts were often part of the struggle

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3 See De Gruchy (2001:239-248).

against apartheid, and have subsequently become significant players in transition and transformation. Let me explore this as both a concerned citizen and a theologian in dialogue.

### 3.1 Human flourishing and social transformation

Just as each art form has its own technique, tradition and tendencies, so each makes its unique impact upon human and social life. Architecture is a good example. As the most public of the arts, architecture shapes the public square in ways that are more obvious and long-lasting than the performance of a one-act play. Architects can create environments that are dehumanising; they can also design environments that enable human flourishing. Much depends, then, on how architects understand being human, and therefore what outcomes will contribute to a more humane built environment. Such questions are philosophical and theological, so how do I respond to them?

Art is a source of pleasure and enjoyment without which our lives would be immeasurably the poorer. Art integrates and enriches culture, it is a means of its memory and expresses its deepest aspirations. These goals, when placed alongside the poverty that racks many parts of the world and the urgent need to achieve equity and economic justice, may be regarded as luxuries by some. But such a view is short-sighted and flawed. Human flourishing cannot be attained if we fail to make the connections between morality and culture, ethics and aesthetics, artistic creativity and the struggle for a just society. Art is not an optional extra but a personal and public necessity that contributes to both human flourishing and social transformation.

Art may have to do with human flourishing, but it does not necessarily contribute directly to social transformation. Nor need it do so in order to be good art. An artist best serves human flourishing and social transformation by seeking to be a good artist. But being a good artist often results in a critique of what is, and therefore might be a painful expression of despair yet also a longing for what might yet be. This is true whether or not artists are overtly concerned about social justice. Art can be socially relevant despite the artists who produce it, and artists who are committed to social justice may produce work that only provides enjoyment and pleasure. Art serves social transformation by challenging, inspiring and empowering people, and people are the artisans of transformation.

Artists enable us to see things differently, laying bare the truth about how things are, and providing visions of new possibility for human struggle and endeavour. Deborah Haynes proposes an *ethical aesthetics* that is

not ideologically hardened but “flexible and helpful, combining care with judgment” (Haynes 1997:8). Her proposal follows Marcuse’s account of the way in which art functions in society. “The work of art,” he writes, “speaks the liberating language, invokes the liberating images of the subordination of death and destruction to the will to live” (Marcuse 1968:62). So, it is that the beautiful serves transformation by supplying images that contradict the inhuman, and by providing alternative transforming images to those of oppression. In this way, art negates present realities, challenges destructive, alienating trends, and anticipates future possibilities. It enables us to remember that which was best in the past while evoking images that alter our consciousness and serve transformation in the present. This it does through its ability to evoke imagination and wonder, causing us to pause and reflect and thereby opening up the possibility of changing our perception and ultimately our lives. All this resonates with my understanding of what it means to do theology, something I am tempted to say for much of what follows, but will resist doing so in the hope that the reader will make the connections.

Art and creativity are germane to being human. If art is to enable human flourishing, it does so not simply by changing our perceptions or altering our environment, but by awakening creativity in all of us. Peggy Delport speaks of aesthetic form “as a vehicle for advancing the perceptive and interpretative capacities of all people, as also their sense of potency within this world” (Delport 1997:134). Without the development and exercise of human creativity, embodied in artistic production in its widest sense, we remain stunted as human beings, deprived of resources for critically and creatively engaging social issues. The public role of art is about the relationship between artistic creativity and human need, human longing and hope for healing. The public role of art is in the empowering of people to resist injustice, affirm their humanity, and live in hope.

During the struggle against apartheid, keeping hope alive was of the essence in doing theology and creating art. To lose hope was to surrender the power to bring about change. The importance of keeping hope alive in situations of despair and oppression is self-evident, for it provides the driving force for struggle without which change is impossible. The same remains true for the process of social healing and transformation in the post-apartheid era. Hope is, in fact, part of the creative human capacity of imagination and, as such it is profoundly connected to art. “Art based in hope,” comments Haynes, “expresses the unspeakable, the ineffable – our deepest desires and dreams that cannot be expressed in any other way ... Hope”, she continues, “is possible because of the unique human capacity

for imagination” (Haynes 1997:244).<sup>4</sup> Hope enables us to transgress the boundaries of what is presently deemed realistic and possible. That, too, is the promise of the Christian gospel. Even amidst the awfulness that characterises so much of contemporary society, hope has the capacity to break open possibilities of newness.

### 3.2 The art of resistance and liberation

The struggle against apartheid produced artistic creativity of remarkable intensity. Nadine Gordimer, the celebrated South African novelist, once noted that “art is at the heart of liberation”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if art is genuinely engaged in bringing forth a new reality amidst the brokenness of society, of imagining new futures and keeping hope alive, then the creative act is part of the struggle for liberation. This role of art goes back long before the advent of apartheid. But the contemporary story may be dated from the Soweto uprising in 1976, well documented by Sue Williamson’s *Resistance Art in South Africa* (1989). If white artists tended to bury their heads in the safety of their cultural enclaves, black artists produced non-confrontational works for white consumption.

Indicative of the awakening of social responsibility amongst South African artists was the manifesto sent out by the Organization of South African Artists in 1975 that challenged artists to participate in the transformation of the country and realise the cultural potential of Africa (Younge 1988:58). In response to that challenge and the events surrounding the Soweto uprising, several initiatives were set in motion and, in the process, art became an instrument of political resistance. This was not an entirely new departure but, as Williamson put it, “a development of the old principle governing traditional African art, which is that art must have a function in the community”. But there was a new twist, namely that this function could bring about political change (Williamson 1989:9). The author Menán du Plessis spoke of this new direction in a speech in 1986:

It is not the morally self-conscious art of liberal protest, nor is it the defiant art of outrage, it is the diverse, complex, extraordinarily rich art of resistance. It is rooted directly in the context of struggle. It seems inconceivable that any of these living forms of art could be isolated from their directly political context and placed up on a stage, behind footlights, or mounted on the walls of a picture gallery (quoted in Williamson 1989:9).

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4 Haynes is drawing on Bloch.

5 In the Introduction to Campschreur and Divendal (1989:12).



Energised by the struggle and the glimmer of hope that was gradually being awoken, a new generation of black artists began to set the scene for a veritable explosion of art. The distinctions between “popular” and “fine” art crumbled, just as the separation of aesthetics and ethics, art and politics, made no sense whatsoever. An explosion of imaginative and colourful posters, T-shirts, graffiti (alongside township poetry, street theatre), along with some remarkable photography (Peter Magubane),<sup>6</sup> to mention but some examples, became the “works of art” for communities engaged in what became the final years of the struggle. The extent to which such an outburst of cultural resistance was perceived as a threat to law and order by the regime can be judged by the fact that the state authorities banned the Cape Town Arts Festival on the eve of its opening in December 1986. But this could not stop the escalating contribution made by artists to the struggle and the ending of apartheid. I shift focus now to the role of art in the process of transition and its contribution to the TRC process.

### 3.3 Transition and the art of reconciliation

In some of her later work, Sue Williamson produced a remarkable exhibition entitled “Truth Games” in which she explores the dynamics of reconciliation within the TRC.

By mediating through art the myriad images and information offered for public consumption in the mass media, I try to give dispassionate readings and offer a focus of new opportunities for engagement. Art can provide a distance and a space for such considerations.<sup>7</sup>

The task of reconstructing the truth on the basis of evidence which was contradictory or sanitised, or based on the testimony of previous informers, inevitably made the process complex and contested (Cherry 2000:137). Getting at the truth is, after all, a dialogical process, always multifaceted, always incomplete. Truth only becomes the truth for us when we interact with it, that is, when it begins to impact on our lives, changing not only our perspective but also changing us and our relationship to the “other”. It is precisely in this regard that the artist fulfils an intensely personal and yet critical public role. This extends far beyond truth commissions and involves not just the victims and perpetrators of past crimes, but all of us.

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6 See for example the important work of Magubane, and the collection of photographs and essays in Jan-Erik Lundström & K. Pierre (1999).

7 Sue Williamson, “Artist’s Statement”, in the brochure for “Truth Games: A series of interactive pieces around the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa”. I describe this in De Gruchy (148-149).

In this process, the creative skill of dramatists, writers, poets, investigative reporters, film and documentary makers make a decisive contribution (van Zyl Slabbert 2000:71).

In the introduction to her second volume, *Art in South Africa: the Future Present* (1996), Williamson commented that the political changes in the 1990s led to a new level of aesthetic freedom. Clearly the demise of apartheid did not mean the end of massive social problems that can be traced back to its legacy. So, it is not surprising that works of art continue to reflect such issues, nor is it surprising that many others have broken out of the “struggle mode” in order to embrace the new and hopeful signs of transformation. Referring to the now much over-used but still important notion of *ubuntu*, Williamson notes that it is this spirit of becoming human through others “which has led many artists into projects aimed at empowering an ever-widening circle of people through creative action” (Williamson and Jamal 1996:7).

### 3.4 Memory, identity and representation

Many of the critical theoretical issues concerning aesthetics became the subject of intense debate, especially those concerning the politics of cultural identity and representation during the struggle years and those of transition (Atkinson 1999:16). Accompanying these debates was the awareness that the challenge of reconciliation in South Africa has to do with the control of the images and symbols. Who controls or shapes the interpretation of the past, determines how we understand ourselves and live in the present? How do we remember the pain and oppression of colonialism and apartheid, and who has the right to represent it? The issue is not primarily about remembering the past, but about whether or not that remembering brings healing or destruction, or paradoxically leads to amnesia through the aesthetic trivialising of history.

This discussion is of importance for the erection of monuments and memorials in the public square. How often have the skills of the sculptor been abused to produce public works that instead of healing the past perpetuate its wrongs. Memorials become monuments to prejudice and hatred; as such they do not simply remember the suffering of the past and honour its victims, but they become means to honour ourselves and legitimate our own chauvinistic, nationalistic and ethnocentric goals. If we are to erect memorials, they must be memorials that redeem the past, not monuments that continue to glorify a triumphant nation or keep alive ethnic hatred.<sup>8</sup>

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8 For the distinction between “memorials” which remember and honour the dead, and “monuments” which keep hatreds alive in the pursuit of our own goals, see Snyman (1995).

Art is an expression of a culture, a means of its memory, representation and enrichment. Clifford Geertz (in Feagin and Maynard 1997:115) expresses this well:

It is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture that participation in the particular we call art, which is in fact but a sector of it, is possible. A theory of art is thus at the same time a theory of culture ...

We know only too well that any culture that becomes closed and self-contained petrifies. A living culture is a dynamic process rather than a static entity. So the breaking open of cultures in the contemporary world through global multicultural interaction is one of the most remarkable features of late twentieth-century civilisation, a source of creativity, and a key factor in the process of social transformation.

European art was dramatically altered through Pablo Picasso's encounter with African carvings. African art, likewise, has been influenced by European culture, Islam, and forms of Christianity (Cole 1989:136ff.), while the interaction between African and European culture in the production of art in South Africa has been evident for many decades (Berman 1996:12ff.). The pioneering work of Cecil Skotnes in South Africa, which was initially influenced by Picasso, is indicative of this, helping to pioneer what came to be known as Township Art (Berman 1993:252ff.). There have also been influences coming from different, non-European, sources. This process is presently escalating as cultural traditions interact and fuse in greater freedom. Most artists are, like many contemporary citizens, cultural hybrids, which makes the heated debate about "representation" more complex than might at first be assumed.

This is fundamental not only for the interaction between African and European culture, but also between African and European Christianity, something long since demonstrated in practice by African-initiated churches. Such interaction requires experiencing the different ways in which they express what they believe in visual arts, in architecture, in music, in dance, in dress, in poetry and in song. The representation of Jesus Christ in African art as distinct from European art or the attempt to copy it, is an indication of how the same faith may be differently and appropriately expressed without losing its integrity. But it also indicates how Christian insight may be enriched, whether African or European, or any other. It also suggests that the churches, as they become cultural melting pots in our multicultural world, can not only serve the renewal of culture beyond their confines, but also uncover resources for their own renewal. In that process, the contribution of artists is essential, so too is

the unleashing of aesthetic creativity within the life of the churches, and hence the importance of a theological aesthetics that can critically reflect on such creativity in relation to God's justice and peace, and so provide the theory which helps sustain aesthetic praxis in integrity, faithfulness and redemptive hope.

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