The Wedding of High Art and Popular Culture:

Beauty that "Will Save the World" and "Which Upon Being Seen Pleases"

by [Christopher Garbowski](#) (September 2020)

In the Loge, Mary Cassatt, 1878

In Guido Mina di Sospiro's recent thought-provoking essay, "How the Most Musical Century in the History of Western

Civilization Came About," the author provides a sobering account of how the abandonment of beauty in musical high art in the previous century facilitated the creation of a number of popular forms of music. A partial explanation is given for the failure of classical music to appeal to most people through its voluntary descent into ugliness that was rationalized, among others, by Theodor Adorno's polemic against beauty. The philosopher argued that focusing on beauty supported capitalism by making it aesthetically pleasing. And so, the author notes, for the Adorno: "Ugliness . . . was to be reproduced in the new language of avant-garde music, and art in general." This musical phenomenon could hardly meet the need that most people have for music that could be listened to—not to mention art to be enjoyed—so a number of other forms of music gratified that need, most notably jazz and rock. Nevertheless, they too eventually veered onto the path of "abstruse inaccessibility." The latter phenomenon is reported, but di Sospiro gives little explanation as to why this occurred.

Despite a few reservations and some issues with causality I largely agree with di Sospiro's description of the state of affairs, but I believe that how it came about within the broader context of art and whether there is hope for any reversal of the situation is worth further reflection. The question of beauty in this respect is particularly important to me, but I wish to narrow it down somewhat by largely focusing on the relationship of popular culture to high art that he indirectly touches upon. I am also interested in a classical axiological concern connected with beauty that adds to its understanding, that is beauty understood as a transcendental.

In the history of world art it is not unprecedented for popular culture to demonstrate a vitality lacking in the art of higher spheres of a given society. One merely has to think of the superb works of the Japanese masters of the *ukiyo-e* and

their woodblock prints virtually mass produced for the middle-class, of which Hokusai's "Great Wave Off Kanagawa" is merely the most iconic, in contrast to the forgotten work of the high art masters of the same period that painted for the nation's aristocratic upper class. Moreover, at times popular forms in due course rose to high levels in the West: the novel is a primary example; motion pictures are another. And the latter pertains not only to the international art house cinema with its undoubted artistic successes, but also Hollywood cinema, with the heights it reached, for instance, in the best works of John Ford and others of a slightly lesser stature—a true wedding of high art and popular culture.

What this also demonstrates is the restlessness in humanity's overall artistic enterprise: especially but not exclusively at its Western end. Heights are reached followed by slower or more rapid descents, which in part explains the phenomenon presented so aptly by di Sospiro on the example of Western music of the twentieth century. And at times there are partial recoveries. For some time now beauty has indeed been largely abandoned or diminished, both in music and the visual fine arts—Arthur Danto's *After the End of Art* (1997) argues the latter issue while Swedish director Ruben Ostlund cleverly deconstructs the pretentions of the artistic milieu in *The Square* (2017). Conversely, beauty is sought by most people wherever they can find it. I live in Poland and a clever Czech car commercial on Polish television from the beginning of the present century capitalized on this dissonance. A young couple attend an opening night at a gallery featuring an ugly conceptual art exhibition. Many in attendance are in real or feigned awe of the "art" on display, not always certain what it signifies. The young couple are bemused. When they decide to leave they have some trouble at the coat rack with their garments: opening night guests crowding around it are uncertain as to whether or not the rack is part of the exhibition. The couple make their way through the throng, take their coats and leave. Outside the couple are comforted by

true beauty: the pleasing design of their new Skoda, a Czech car. In part this commercial proves Adorno's argument, but it primarily demonstrates a human reaction to the state of high art he helped perpetuate: if there is a dearth of beauty on high it is gladly accepted in a lower form, like, for instance, jazz or rock.

The above commercial also illustrates, at something of a remove, an aspect of beauty Martha Bayles argues is at the base of the rise of one of the outstanding forms of the musical arts of the twentieth century, the blues. "For more than a century," the critic argues, "the blues performer's motto has not been 'art for art's sake' but 'make way for the paying customer.'"[1] And paradoxically or not this contributed to the vitality of the form. Frank Capra, who at least some scholars acknowledge as an auteur, expressed a similar sentiment in his autobiography *The Name Above the Title* (1971), where he relates that when he was making his films in the 1930s filmmakers had various visions of their art but it was the viewers who voted for them by purchasing tickets. In democratic art forms the customers—i.e. consumers—are the patrons.

What can we say about these patrons? Are they any worse than the usually aristocratic patrons of the past? I wish to relate this question to the axiological problem of beauty as a transcendental. One of the strongest statements along this line is by Fyodor Dostoevsky and his oft cited statement: "Beauty will save the world." Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev attributes the statement, actually a line from a character in *The Idiot*, directly to the author with beauty as a transcendental. "The infinity of the human soul—having been revealed in Christ and capable of fitting into itself all the boundlessness of divinity—is at one and the same time both the greatest good, the highest truth, and the most perfect beauty," he insists, concluding:

> Truth is good, perceived by the human mind; beauty is the

> same good and the same truth, corporeally embodied in solid living form. And its full embodiment—the end, the goal, and the perfection—already exists in everything, and this is why Dostoevsky said that beauty will save the world.[2]

Having attended Orthodox liturgies, where beauty is such an uplifting element of the experience, this argument is especially close to me. I often think of Dostoevsky at such moments. An particularly powerful expression of this is Andrei Rublev's icon *Holy Trinity*, which arguably brings this transcendental aspect of high art to the fore.

Nor should we forget the art of Dostoevsky himself. But besides being profound his novels are deeply enthralling—he is a master storyteller. We might say that the beauty he creates is also entertaining. Here it is worth looking at how the beauty of art is open to a more popular perception. A twentieth century philosopher who devoted much thought to the relationship of beauty and art is Jacques Maritain. He argued the general end of art is beauty. Since art is a creative activity and is dependent on the creator, the beauty it aspires to is also in a relationship to the divine as well as to the transcendentals of goodness, truth and unity. If this were all it would be close to Dostoevsky in Soloviev's reading. However, in his seminal *Art and Scholasticism* (1920) Maritain also claims the beauty that is the proper end of both artisans and artists is "that which upon being seen pleases."

It hardly needs stressing that this pleasure is not simply related to the pleasure principle. Otherwise its relationship to the transcendentals makes little sense. For one thing, Maritain stresses the intellectual nature of the pleasure evoked by art. On a broader level, however, what is implicit in this understanding of beauty is its relationship to the good life, that is the ethical nature of happiness when it is attained through the virtues. But as the American founding fathers intuited, happiness must be pursued: it does not come on its own. And this is witnessed in the history of Western

art. The restless pursuit of happiness through beauty in the arts partly explains the myriad styles that were developed over the ages.

We might also compare Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* to Rublev's *Holy Trinity*. Here we have a religious work that makes a tremendous effort to reach out to the viewers through its depicted narrative drama and is rewarded by the enormous popularity of the work that it has maintained over a number of centuries, often among ordinary viewers and through commercial and home spun copies. That outreach is a frequent characteristic of Western art, and as the patron or "consumer" changed so did the artist and the art form. Worth adding, however, is it still seems necessary to include the virtues in order to provide a convincing depiction of the successful pursuit of happiness, even in motion pictures.[3] Similarly, in *The Pleasures of Virtue* (1995) Anne Crippen Rudderman persuasively argues happiness in the novels of Jane Austen is grounded in the virtues in a manner that would make Aristotle proud. My hunch, in turn, is that the excellence of a number of Hollywood romantic comedies from *It Happened One Night* (1934) right on up to Nora Ephron is in part a legacy of the impact of Austen on the genre, however indirect.

But does all this mean that the contemporary hiatus with which di Sospiro pessimistically finishes his reflections in his selected art is merely temporary? I would like to believe that this is the case. However, for a new form to embody beauty as a transcendental an effort must be made on the part of the artists to attain this on the one hand while the patrons—whoever they are—must be able to find themselves and their needs within that form. In this context it is worth looking at a missed opportunity in one of the musical art forms briefly examined by the author.

Within its music and outreach to the listeners rock music reached its acme in the 1970s after which it declined and other popular forms of music caught the attention of the

young. But this culminating point was not progressive rock, as di Sospiro suggests, but its refined version rooted in the blues and even religion.[4] This was memorably demonstrated on November 25,1976, when, assisted by a number of musical friends, the five man rock ensemble known as The Band bid their public farewell in a concert billed 'The Last Waltz'. Martin Scorsese's subsequent "rockumentary," also entitled *The Last Waltz* (1978), a cultural artefact that arose in the concert's wake,[5] has turned out to be even more memorable. Significantly, the film captures the inspired rendition of The Band's classic "The Weight," with the vocal support of the superlative Gospel group the Staples. The Gospel group did not have to depart from their *métier* to any great degree in their stirring contribution to this rock song's performance, almost appropriating it from The Band, and demonstrating its debt to their spiritual musical tradition. Deeply moved by the effort and its poignant result one of the vocalists from the Staples at the very end of "The Weight" exclaims: "Beautiful!"[6] I would argue the beauty the artist intuited captured beauty in alignment both with truth and goodness as well as delight, wedding high art and popular culture to the highest degree.

But sadly with a few exceptions this was not developed further in rock. Arguably, there were a few such moments in disco, given their due by that subtle cinematic master, Whit Stillman in his *Last Days of Disco* (1998). But while we are waiting for a new form that combines the high and the popular to a pleasing, at times transcendent beauty, we have those recorded artistic moments that pass the test of time—another perhaps banal, but certain means of evaluating the ultimate aesthetic value of beauty, whether or not we attribute to it the meta axiological value of a transcendental. A thing of beauty is "a joy forever," Keats intuited. And like that Grecian urn he praises, often enough the object of beauty—in whatever art form it is captured—combines exquisite craftsmanship and a sublime simplicity that pleases the prince and the pauper, and aids us in attaining a level of self transcendence[7]: both

the human horizontal and, yes, at times the spiritual vertical.

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[1] Martha Bayles, Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty & Meaning in American Popular Music (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1996), 187.

[2] Vladimir Soloviev, The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics by V.S. Soloviev, edited and translated by Vladimir Wozniuk (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), p. 16.

[3] Joseph Kupfer, Visions of Virtue in Popular Film (Bouldor, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999). In his film analyses Kupfer applies virtue ethics introduced to moral philosophy by Alisdair MacIntyre.

[4] Randall Stevens, The Devil's Music: How Christians Inspired, Condemned, and Embraced Rock 'n' Roll (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2018)

[5] In his book on the event Neil Miniturn even counts the film with Scorsese's touch as more important than the concert itself: see his The Last Waltz of the Band. 'CMS Sourcebooks in American Music' no. 2, edited by Michael J Budds (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2005). Certainly, the audiovisual recording surpasses mere audio recordings, doing greater justice to the crucial element of performance in a concert.

[6] A number of available versions of this number, for instance on DVD or YouTube, have unfortunately edited out this exclamation.

[7] The term self transcendence needs little explanation, but a fuller understanding is given to it in the works of Viktor E. Frankl.

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Christopher Garbowski is an associate professor at the Department of English at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Poland. He is the author or co-editor of several books, among them is *Religious Life in Poland: History, Diversity and Modern Issues* from 2014. His most recent book is *Cinematic Echoes of Covenants Past and Present: National Identity in the Historical Films of Steven Spielberg and Andrzej Wajda* published in 2018.

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